

Luke 21 Beginning at the End

Today is the beginning of a new church year. My son Tony never fails to make that clear by greeting his congregation with the phrase Happy New Year. This is a part of his approach to the Advent liturgy. So for those of you who like to be early with their wishes and resolutions—you can wish everyone a Happy New Year today and be quite correct liturgically. We concluded the year B cycle last Sunday by celebrating Christ the King Sunday using images from Old and New Testament passages relating to God's throne and reign. This kingdom image is far removed from the images found in the beginning of the narrative we retell every year. A narrative about a child born to peasant parents whose arrival in this manner is both a fulfillment of ancient prophecy but also an unexpected event for no one anticipated how the promised redemption would arrive. Today we begin retelling the story found in the gospels--the story of the good news of God's grace which Christ embodied for us. This year the story will be told through the lens of the gospel account found in Luke. Today, all around us we can see evidence of people looking forward to the birth of the infant Jesus. Many see that as the beginning of the gospel story. Or at least many people are looking forward to the season celebrating this event called Christmas--even if they are more concerned with the trappings which now surround it than the meaning of the event itself within their lives. But our concerns are more with the meaning of this event--the understanding that God loved humanity so much that God took the initiative to demonstrate again just how much God cared for this world. And the good news found in the story begins long before the events of Bethlehem. And in those events which predate the nativity, we also find God's message to the world about redemption, about God's expectations, and about how God's people are to live. This perhaps explains the lectionary's selections for our Scripture readings from the Word this morning. The opening words from the passage from Jeremiah are: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." This is followed by the promise that fulfillment will be through a righteous branch to spring up for David. Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety because justice and righteousness will be executed in the land. These words brought hope to those whom Jeremiah spoke. These were people who had either been carried away from their home or people who even if they were allowed to stay, had lost all their possessions. These are words addressed to people looking around and seeing despair and darkness. These are words which still have meaning for us. These are words that we also need to hear this Advent. The days are surely coming, says the Lord. When the news is grim and there is no shortage of injustice or unrighteousness or damnation or danger in the world around us, we are called to hold up this same vision of God's promised future—a future of justice and safety in the land. We are called not only to speak of it, but also to live into it. During all the distressful events happening in every nation, including ours, Christians are called to stand up and raise our heads in anticipation of the redemption which has already been provided by God's grace. We are called to work for the things which God's kingdom stands for: justice and mercy, even in the presence of war and violence raging around the world. We need to know and believe that there are alternatives to the narrative being proclaimed by the world. There are other ways to live than according to fears and retaliation. We are called to hold onto and proclaim with Jeremiah that the day is surely coming when God's kingdom will come fully

into being. We are called to bear witness to that kingdom so that it is possible for the world to see signs that it is coming. Advent is a time to proclaim, not just that God became man and lived among us some two thousand years ago. It is a time to proclaim that the kingdom of God is present near to us even in the brokenness of this world. Advent is a time to look around and be alert for those instances where God's reign exists here and now as people live lives according to the teachings which that infant will proclaim—Love God and neighbor with the definition of neighbor being enlarged to include those outside our neighborhood. These signs of the kingdom may not be obvious, but they are there and that makes them all the more precious in the darkness. Emmanuel came and provided the redemption for us because in Christ we recognize that as Jeremiah 33: 16 concludes, "The Lord is our righteousness." Yet Jesus told his disciples that his presence with them then was not the end of this world. In the passages preceding the one I read Jesus speaks of the destruction of the Temple, of wars and rumors of wars which are to come to pass before heaven and earth pass away. Advent is also a time to consider another aspect of this season of preparation. We are still living in darkness and awaiting the coming of the Lord again. We have the light in that darkness called hope. We are waiting for the time when the hope expressed by the ancient prophets will be fully realized. Many things will happen before Christ comes again. Our passage from Luke addresses this issue. It does not come from the opening portion of the narrative about the birth which we often view as the fulfilled promise given to the people through Jeremiah. This gospel passage is found near the end of the gospel account of Jesus' life. Like a passage from Mark we looked at recently; this is a passage full of apocalyptic language—language containing a revelation about God and God's plans for this world. The images in this passage carry a sense of foreboding. The events described are dire and frightening. Looking at texts like this one force us to tune out the Christmas carols being played on the radio, to look away from Christmas trees and candy canes found in the stores and think about what happens when we are called to stand before the Son of Man. The context of the passage is a conversation between Jesus and the disciples. The disciples have asked Jesus when the end will come. What will be the signs to look for? We too like to raise the issue of timing for this event. People often read this passage trying to discern what events this passage is describing. Some approach it by naming the destruction of the Temple as one of the events. Others name different historical calamities as the sign. Or perhaps we look around us and see in our time the uncanny and perhaps unwelcome resonance that today's events have with those in this section of scripture. Unlike Mark's account seems to be written with an expectation and urgency about the second coming, Luke's account seems deliberately vague about the timing of Jesus' return. There is within this text a refusal to offer any hint of a timetable. Instead, in Luke, Jesus places an emphasis on being alert and watching because the signs that the Lord is coming will be transparent to the faithful. But they have to be prepared all the time. Just like they can tell summer is near when the fig tree sprouts its leaves, the signs of the Lord's coming will appear. Jesus' coming again is certain, but the timing is not. Jesus is concerned about the character and behavior of the discipleship community while they wait. Luke's account shifts the question we need to ask as disciples from "when will these things happen" to "how shall we live in the meantime." Jesus warns the early followers that the day when they will be called to stand before the Son of Man will come unexpectedly. They are to pray and be alert at all times so that they will be prepared when the

waiting is over. This preparation for Christ coming again is an essential part of what the Advent season is about. In many ways that Jesus connects these ominous and foreboding events to our redemption is startling to say the least. We are told when these events come upon the world and people are fainting from fear, those who follow Jesus are to stand up and raise their heads because their redemption is drawing near. We are to live in this “in-between-time” ready for his coming. Although it is filled with tension, it is nevertheless also characterized by hope and courage because we know the end of the story. While that end represented by the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time is not here yet, we know the end has been written by the resurrected Christ. It is in this context that our community of faith can be a place of light and hope, courage and confidence. Because of our hope we can be a light shining in a world full of fear and darkness. We are called not to wait passively, but to stand up and raise our heads proclaiming and living what we know. The days are surely coming, says the Lord when justice and righteousness will be executed in the land. We are called to active as we wait and witness to justice and righteousness. A commentator whose reflections I often read says that we may have this whole waiting for God backwards. He suggests that maybe the reason the Second Coming has been delayed so long is that God is waiting on us. God is sovereign and righteous, so often the question is asked why does evil exist and seem so prevalent. Perhaps it is because God is waiting on us. God is not controlling and does not use coercive power. God beckons and invites. God has demonstrated an unimaginable love and grace toward us through the infant Jesus who grew among us and revealed that love to us. So maybe God is waiting on us to figure out how to peel away our scared and stingy lives to love without reservation. Maybe God is lighting a millennium of Advent candles waiting for us to respond to the grace poured out for all humans by being that Grace. God has chosen to work with and through humans in the waters of birth, baptism, life and death on a cross to bring us a message of love and reconciliation. This Advent, let us contemplate what we are waiting for and how we are doing that waiting. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.