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The Second Coming of Christ

Luke 21:25-36

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In the weeks leading up to Christmas many of our schedules are filled with activities, special events, gatherings with friends, parties, music, worship all of which I enjoy. Yesterday Jill and I attended the winter music festival at Nauset Regional High School and it was great hearing so many of our students singing and playing their instruments in the different groups. Jill and I were also delighted to be able to attend a lunch at Pat and Ted Foot's home on Wednesday with many of the leaders of BBC's Holiday Fair. The final tally on the Fair is \$29,000 that will be split between Lower Cape Outreach Council and Hands of Hope Outreach Center to assist people with basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. At lunch I complimented Pat, Jan, and Joyce on how nice everything was and how they are always so organized and prepared. For many of us, part of preparing for Christmas is getting our home decorated and prepared for company. In the midst of the activities of the season and the worries and stress that can be a part of it also, we can forget, often for chunks of time, that so much of what is going on is related to, related to, don't tell me....oh, yeah, the birth of Jesus and Christmas. Christmas is about the birth or first coming of Jesus. As Christians we also recall that Jesus promised to come again.

The Second Coming of Christ is a theme in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke which all feature a discourse by Jesus on the subject. Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches that follow a set pattern of scriptures for each Sunday of the year, all include a gospel lesson in Advent on the return of Christ. This makes the Second Coming an annual topic in worship. I decided we should take a Sunday to do so also. In Luke 21:25-36 Jesus says about his return,

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ **People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.** ²⁷

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' **with power and great glory.** ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So

also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴ “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ **Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength** to escape all these things that will take place, and **to stand** before the Son of Man.”

Interest in Jesus’ return can be seen in the many web sites, blogs, and books which discuss it, including more than a few that try to predict when Christ will actually return. I did a search online for “*second coming of Christ*” and it gave me 3,240,000 results! Greg suggested I do a search on “the end of the world” and that produced almost 2 billion results! There is a recent movie *2012* which reviewers have called a disaster about the disaster of the end of the world. At the other end of the spectrum, are people for whom talk about cosmic signs in the sun, moon, and stars and the powers of the heavens being shaken sounds somewhat primitive, pre-scientific, and a little strange.

It is interesting to me that the first coming of Jesus was a quiet event in a small town observed by very few people. The Bible says the second coming of Christ will be unmistakable and seen by the whole world. Regarding the second coming of Christ, Diana Butler Bass observed, “*What words better describe our world than those of Luke? “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.” These are not words of some far-off moment in time. They are words of **NOW**: Our cities and churches are full of people who are afraid — afraid of loss of their jobs, of income, of health care, of decency, of safety, of change, of pluralism, of ... of ... of ... The list of fears is nearly endless. Yet — be honest — has there ever really been a time in human history when we’ve not been filled with such fears? Luke’s words are also the words of all our **yesterdays**. We may imagine that the past was better, safer, cleaner, or more stable, but that is not the case. We are a fragile lot, we humans, and our history is roiled with fear — and the stupid things that we humans do when we are afraid. And sadly enough, they are probably the words of many of humanity’s **tomorrows**.”*

Jesus says, “*When you see these things, do not cower in fear, for your transformation is drawing near.*” Advent teaches us that in the darkest places of human oppression, the pain of hunger, the violence of war, and political distress that God’s reign is among us. “*Do not be caught off-guard by the fear-filled tides of history,*” Jesus

warned. *“But be mindful, praying for strength, that you may escape the fears that roil the earth, and may stand with God”* (Luke 21:36).

I confess that I spend almost no time trying to discern when or if Christ is going to return soon. Jesus said to his disciples in Mark 13:32, *“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, **nor the Son**, but only the Father.”* In Acts 1:7 Jesus says to his followers, *“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”*

I will leave it to you to decide whether we should be seeking to calculate or determine the time of an event that Jesus himself said God only knows. I have tried for most of my life not to worry about things over which I have no control. This includes the return of Christ. God will determine when it happens in God's time. It seems a wiser use of our limited time on earth to do what Jesus says to do, to avoid what Jesus says to avoid, and to leave the rest to the Lord. In this passage from Luke, Jesus is advocating that we do several things. **Be alert, pray, be prepared to stand.**

May 19, 1780 was a day when an abnormal darkening of the day sky was observed over New England and parts of Canada. Speculation exists that this was due to a combination of smoke from forest fires and a thick fog. The darkness was so complete that candles were required from noon until midnight, when it finally dispersed and the stars could be seen.

Some of the representatives in the Connecticut House of Representatives, glancing out the windows, feared that the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Colonel Abraham Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House, rose and said, *“The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought.”*

That is the kind of attitude Jesus is encouraging. Christ urges us not to faint from fear or foreboding now, when Christ returns, or anytime in between regardless of what may be going on in the world or in our life. We are to be faithful in the duties to which he calls us. It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

This is a time of year when people watch a lot of football. Like in football, Jesus coaches us to engage in defensive and offensive activities. **Defensively**, Jesus says we are to be on our guard so that our hearts are not weighed down with *“dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.”* Dissipation, that's a word that I'm sure most of us use regularly in conversation. I had to look it up. Dissipation is *“the nausea that*

follows too much drinking or wasteful living. It can also refer to dissolution, disintegration, or to lose irrecoverably.” Jesus says we are to avoid, we are to be on the defense against dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of this life. In football terms, we can’t let them run all over us and pound us in the ground. Or if we have, we need to ask Jesus to take us on his team and coach us up how to live better and defend ourselves against these things. Jesus loves taking on a challenge and he will work with us.

What are the worries of this life that Jesus refers to? For each of us they may be the same and different. You know what they are for you. Jesus doesn’t want us weighed down by worry because worry doesn’t help anything but it hurts everything. God wants us to live wisely and well. Ephesians 5:15-18 says, *“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.”*

Jesus and Paul both warn us to play good defense so our hearts don’t get weighed down by worldly distractions. In Driver’s Ed they teach students that distraction can be deadly. There are all kinds of warnings about accidents caused by distracted drivers who while driving are also talking, texting, eating, drinking, putting on makeup, fiddling with music, shaving, or the worst I ever saw – even flossing their teeth. Just as it isn’t good to be a distracted driver, we don’t want to be distracted followers of Jesus either.

We want to defend against distractions, dissipation, and things that might cause us to be caught unaware by the coming of Christ. Now I know there are at least a couple people listening to the message who are thinking, *“This has nothing to do with my life. I’m not at all concerned about this second coming stuff. I don’t think it will happen in my life.”* Whatever one’s view on the time of the return of Christ and the judgment of God, we all must face the inescapable fact that every life comes to an end. Being on our guard and keeping the end of life in view lends significance and urgency to each new day. One person noted, *“Always remember the end of your life and then you will never sin.”*

Defensively Jesus tells us to be our guard.

Offensively, Jesus tells us to be alert at all times, praying that we may have the strength to persevere and stand. In his book *Why Prayers are Unanswered*, John Lavendar shares a story about pastor and author Norman Vincent Peale. When Peale was a boy, he found a big, black cigar, slipped into an alley, and lit it up. It didn’t taste

good, but it made him feel grown up...until he saw his father coming. Quickly he put the cigar behind his back and tried to act casual. Desperate to divert his father's attention, Norman pointed to a billboard advertising a circus. *"Can I go, dad? Please, let's go when it comes to town."*

His father's reply taught Norman a lesson he never forgot.

"Son" he answered quietly but firmly, ***"never make a petition while at the same time trying to hide a smoldering disobedience."***

Kevin read earlier the passage from 1 Thessalonians that says we are to keep the faith so that we may be blameless before our God at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Perhaps Jesus is saying that our praying will be more effective and fruitful if our hands are no longer holding onto disobedience. If our heart is lifted up with faith and expectation rather than weighed down worries and bad habits.

Offensively, as Christians we are to be praying, standing, living courageously and honorably with love and devotion while we wait for Jesus' return. There is a nice story on the front page of today's The Cape Cod Times about the work that has been done on Donna and Sean's home. The reporter asked me about why our church did what we did and replied that we simply try to Love God, Love People and Be a Force for Good. That is being on the offense for God rather than just sitting back.

On Friday night Jill and I went to see the movie *The Blind Side* and I highly recommend it. It is based on a true story of a Christian family that gave love and a home to a homeless African American young man who happened to be very big and developed into a great football player. It is a powerful story. Michael becomes a great left tackle whose job is to protect the quarterback. He learns to keep blocking and not to give up on a play until he hears the whistle. We are not sit back in a "prevent defense." We are to stay on the offensive.

In a sense, this is what Jesus is telling us to do – we are to keep exerting ourselves until the final whistle blows. Until we die or the Lord returns there is hope for us that we can repent and change. There are opportunities for us to pursue, work for us to do. Jesus wants us to go all out for him as long as we have breath and strength. At Christmas we tend to focus on Jesus as a meek and mild child. When he returns, he will be far different. He will be coming in power and glory and on that day we want to be able to stand and hold our head high as Jesus says.

This Advent, remember: **Be Alert. Pray. Stand. And do not be afraid.**