

Be Alert - The Messiah is Coming

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on December 2, 2018

Luke 21:25-36

25 '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.'

As hard as it is to believe, this morning is the first Sunday in Advent. To me it seems like it was only yesterday that we were lighting candles in the advent wreath, engaging in advent projects and thinking about Christmas. Yet, here we are again preparing ourselves for the coming of the Messiah. It all seems so familiar. At the same time, there is so much we forget.

Even though we re-read the same Scripture readings every three years, and we hear sermons that sound remarkably similar to those we have heard before, it is amazing how much we need to be reminded of what Advent means, why we celebrate Advent, and why it is important for us to "be alert" for the coming of the Christ.

Given our need to have our memories refreshed on all these matters, let us begin with a reminder that Advent literally translated from the Latin means, "the coming." And Advent, which has been observed from about the fourth century on, was originally a time when converts to Christianity readied themselves for

baptism. Also, during the Middle Ages, Advent became associated with preparation for the Second Coming. In many liturgical churches this is still true today. Only in the last fifty years has Advent come to be thought of as a time of anticipating the Nativity, on Christmas Day.

So, if you were wondering about today's readings, they are based on the traditional themes of Advent that have existed since the fourth century, which explains their emphasis on the end times. While to modern Christians they may seem to be a strange choice of texts, especially to those who don't follow the Lectionary, in their historical context they are completely appropriate as these readings have been used for centuries to remind Christians at the beginning of the new church year that our only hope lies in the coming of the Messiah; which is the exact same hope the people of Israel had at the time that Jesus first came. Therefore, as we journey today in the ancient tradition of the church, we enter the season of Advent, the season of "the coming" with a reminder from the gospel of Luke to be alert because "our redemption is near." But, what does this mean?

As we seek to understand our calling to be alert, and to wait upon God for our redemption, it is worth pointing out that to the modern reader, or at least to the reader who has grown up in the comforts of the first world, this calling may seem strange because we look at life and say to ourselves, "things are not so bad." However, as we read today's text, keep in mind that Jesus is talking to people for whom these words would have a deep personal meaning. Keep in mind that Jesus' audience are an Exodus people. They are a Passover people. They are a people who have a history of being squeezed by Egypt, Babylon and Rome. This means that to these people, redemption was the longing of their heart. It was woven into the fabric of their history. It was woven into the fabric of their existence in the first century. It was their dream. It was their passion.

Equally woven into their DNA was the pathway through which redemption would come. For just as God delivered them mightily in the days of Egypt, taking them out of captivity and leading them through the Red Sea, and through the Jordan River, and just as God preserved the people of Israel in Babylon and brought them back to the Holy Land; the people of Israel believed that God would send the Messiah to deliver them once more. Armed with this belief, the people of Israel had hope, that even though they were up against the super power of the world, God would redeem them, just as he had in previous generations. Armed with this

hope, the people of Israel believed that one day the voice of oppression and injustice would be silenced in their land and they would once again be free.

This was the hope of every Jew when Christ first came to earth. However, as we are soberly reminded in Scripture, when God did send the promised Saviour, his people didn't recognize him. Even though he healed the lame, the deaf, the dumb and blind. Even though he cast out demons, and he calmed storms and multiplied food and he raised the dead; even with all these signs that had never been seen before in the nations' history, they failed to recognize his presence among them. Even though the fig tree had bloomed, to use the words of verse twenty nine of this morning's reading, the people failed to recognize that summer was near.

As a result, in the earlier verses of chapter twenty one of Luke's gospel, Jesus pronounced judgement on Jerusalem proclaiming that it would be destroyed and its people would be killed or led into captivity abroad. In less than forty years from the time Christ uttered these words, his words all came to pass. For in the year 70 A.D. the armies of Rome surrounded Jerusalem and leveled it to the ground and over a million people perished.

This is the context of today's reading. This is the context of the warning we find to remain alert for the coming of Christ, as we wait in faith for our redemption. This is the historical, literary, and cultural context that is vital in our understanding of how we are to apply today's reading to our own preparation for the coming of Christ.

So, as we begin a new church year, what does it mean to be alert as we wait in faith for our redemption? Before addressing this question I would like to make two other observations about the apocalyptic passage we have read in Luke. The first is that the prophecies against Jerusalem and the prophecies of the second coming of Christ that we find in Luke twenty one are mirror prophecies. As an aside, the use of mirror prophecies is a common practice in all apocalyptic writings; where the prophets declare that the way God acts in one set of circumstances is the model for how God will act in another. Applying this to today's reading, it means that the answers to the riddles of Christ's second coming we will be found in the first. It also means that the answers to the Christ's second coming will be found in the mirror prophecies given against Jerusalem.

A second observation I would like to make is that it is very important to be familiar with the entire breadth of Scripture when interpreting passages like the ones we read this morning, for often each word or phrase is embedded with meaning that can only be unlocked from other passages of Scripture. Again, the reason it is so important to be familiar with the entire word of God is because such knowledge is necessary, to discern whether a prophecy is to be interpreted literally, figuratively, or both among other things. For example, in verses twenty five and twenty six of today's reading we are told that there will be signs in the sun, moon, stars, and earth and that the powers of heaven would be shaken. Does this mean the coming of Christ will be accompanied by great cosmic events and earthly calamities, similar to those that occurred in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's first coming, or is this a figurative way of saying the powers and authorities in heaven and on earth will be shaken or does it mean both? Personally, I believe it means both.

That being said, I need to return to the original question that I asked, and try to wrap things up. So, as we begin the season of Advent, what does it mean to be alert as we wait in faith for our redemption?

Using the techniques I have described, here are my conclusions. First being alert means paying attention for the God who is present because he is missed by most, even though the signs of his presence are most obvious. Being alert means being open to welcome and obey the God who comes in forms we do not expect and challenges our most cherished beliefs; and lays claim to the things we desire most in life. Being alert means recognizing that in this world we are captives to forces of evil that are many fold stronger than we are. As a result, we are foolish to think we can overthrow them on our own strength. To try and do so will lead to our destruction, just as it led to the destruction of Jerusalem when they tried to break the yoke of Rome on their own strength. Being alert means living each day with hope in the midst of darkness knowing that the day of our redemption draws near. Being alert means recognizing that the calling we have been given is a matter of life and death and needs to be treated with the same degree of gravity we would treat any other life and death matter. Being alert means living each moment as if Christ died yesterday, rose today, and is coming back tomorrow.

This is what it means to be alert as we wait for our redemption to draw near. So as we begin this season of Advent, may we commit ourselves anew to being alert as we await the coming of the Messiah.