

Stand Up and Raise Your Heads – Your Redemption is Drawing Near!

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Text Luke 21:25-28 NRSV

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.”

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We all heard the saying, “It’s always darkest before the dawn.” I don’t know how true that is scientifically speaking, but when we are surrounded by the darkness of our trials and tribulations, the dawn of God’s saving action can’t come soon enough. That darkness is dark indeed. In Luke 21, Jesus gives us this startling promise: Just when things seem to be at their worst, that’s the time to look up because Jesus will be coming in power and glory.

The reason this text is included in the lectionary’s Readings for Advent is because these are the words of Jesus concerning what we call “signs of the end of the age” or what we usually call The Second Coming of Christ. (Christmas is always about celebrating the Christ came, and will come again.) The occasion for this teaching is in Jerusalem during Passover, when some of the disciples, “were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God” (Luke 21:5 NIV). For them, the Temple was a source of national and religious pride, an emblem of Israel’s status as God’s special chosen people. They could not imagine life without it. It was a “forever” thing.

So when Jesus – instead of joining them in admiring this magnificent monument to Yahweh – says instead that their generation will see it utterly destroyed, they must have been appalled. It would have been unthinkable to them that God would allow the temple to be destroyed.

We are living in the Age of the Unthinkable. Could any of us in America have imagined a future in which our children would be less healthy, less educated, and more economically insecure than we were? As someone who grew up during the Cold War, it is unthinkable to me that the POTUS could be accused of colluding with Russians to undermine American democracy. And of course no one, even a few decades ago, could have imagined that human industry could create global environmental catastrophe. We hear of the unthinkable happening, all over the world, every day. And it overwhelms us.

In AD 70, roughly 40 years after Jesus gave this teaching, the unthinkable did happen. Rome marched on Jerusalem, sacked the city, razed the temple. Two millenia later people still gather at the temple's one remaining wall to cry and to mourn. But if the only thing we take away from Luke 21 is that Jesus was an accurate foreteller of the future, then we are taking away too little! If we imagine that Jesus was describing an apocalyptic future – complete with the razing of the Temple, the persecution of his followers, and the end of life as they knew it – in order to put the proverbial fear of God into them, then we completely miss the point!

Jesus, the one who repeatedly teaches us to “fear not,” does not intend to scare his disciples. He intends to prepare them.

Be observant, be mindful, be ready.
Look out, look in, look up.

Be observant. Look out. See the signs for what they are.

When the unthinkable happens, it doesn't mean God has failed. It means God's kingdom is coming!

In Luke 21, Jesus is essentially echoing the sentiments of the Psalm 121:

Psalm 121:1-2

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?
- 2 My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

It is easier to misunderstand what is meant here. If the Psalmist looks up to the hills, he will see shrines to other gods. My help doesn't come from them, the Psalm declares. My help comes from the One who MADE those hills!

In the same way, Jesus is reminding us: Human institutions – the temple, the family clan, the nation-state, the military – don't place your hope in them. Your hope comes from God, and God's kingdom. And when these institutions fail you, even when they turn on you, don't panic. God's kingdom is coming near.

Be mindful. Look in. “Be careful or your hearts will be weighted down” with over indulgence, self-medication, or anxiety. (verse 34)

Most of us, most of the time, are sleep walking through life. Advent is a good time to take stock of our life and ask, what have I been holding onto that has me weighted down? Whatever that is, that is stuff that keeps us from giving generously to those in need, from speaking up for the exploited, and for standing up to injustice.

But using the disciple's comment about the temple as a teachable moment, Jesus is confronting the same tendencies Jeremiah saw:

7 This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 2 “Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message:

“ ‘Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. 3 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. 4 Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” 5 If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, 7 then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. 8 But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. (Je 7:1-8 NIV)

Be ready. Look up. The most beautiful phrase in this text is verse 28: “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

“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.” (Luke 21:36 NRSV)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor, Christian martyr, and one of the foremost theologians of the 20th Century, also lived in unthinkable times. In one of his Christmas sermons, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preaches verse 28 by alluding to miners trapped in darkness, giving up all hope until they hear the distant sound of others digging to find them. Just when things seem to be at their worst, Jesus says, that’s the time to look up, because the Son of Man will be coming in power and glory.

He writes:

Look up, you whose eyes are heavy with tears and who mourn that the earth has snatched everything from you. Look up, you who are so heavy laden with guilt that you feel you cannot look up. Look up, your salvation draws near. When you look up, things look quite different from what you have seen day by day, more real far greater, and more powerful. If only it were true. Be patient. Wait a little longer. Wait and something quite new will come over you. God will come.

--Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christmas Sermons

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