

STAND UP AND RAISE YOUR HEAD: JESUS IS COMING!
LUKE 21: 25-36; JEREMIAH 33: 14-16
FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
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NOVEMBER 29, 2009

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Jeremiah 33: 14-16: 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. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

As the Angel Gabriella indicated in her time with the young disciples, we prepare for Christ to come by placing Christmas within the context of God coming throughout history and at the end of time. During Advent we remember the ways God came in the past. Like Mary we open our hearts so that we give birth to Christ in the present. We also look forward to the end time when God's Kingdom will be fulfilled.

Jesus used parables and symbolism to help the disciples prepare for divine intervention. In our gospel reading from the 21st chapter of Luke, Jesus uses prophetic imagery from Isaiah (13:10), Joel (2:10), Zephaniah (1:15), Daniel (7: 13-14) and other Old Testament and Jewish texts. Some biblical scholars suggest our passage continues the warning Jesus gave the disciples about the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (Tom Wright, Luke for Everyone). Others think Jesus referred to the end times (Mariam Kamell, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, 21).

Some of the imagery may be unfamiliar to us. The sea, for example, often symbolized chaos in Jewish texts. Clouds signified glorification. When Jesus referenced the Son of Man coming in the clouds, the disciples would think about the Messianic hope found in the Book of Daniel. Throughout history the people of God have yearned for deliverance during difficult times.

If we prepare for Christ's coming, we prepare for much more than a nice candle light service, a gift exchange with family and friends, and a holiday away from school and work. At Christmas we celebrate the historical incarnation of God in Jesus Christ over two thousand years ago; but we also celebrate God coming into the world throughout history and at the end of time.

Are we ready for God to break into our lives in this time and place? Jesus describes a rather scary scenario; but he tells the disciples to stand up and raise their heads, even if the powers of this world seem to be falling apart. While others may fear what they see, Jesus told the disciples to stand up and raise their heads because redemption and the kingdom of God were drawing near. "Those who trust in God and live faithfully need not fear when the world collapses around them. Rather, they should stand confidently, trusting in God's faithfulness to bring about their emancipation from a world hostile to Christians" (Mariam Kamell, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, 23).

Jesus warned the disciples and he warns us to stay alert and be on guard. We must take care that we are not weighed down by the worries of this life so that we miss Christ coming into our midst. We must pray for strength so that we can stand before Jesus. He is coming. Are we ready? Listen to the Good News from **Luke 21: 25-36**.

'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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming

upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’ Then Jesus told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ‘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, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 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.’

Thanks be to God for the reading of this Word. Please pray with me. Mighty God, we are in awe of your power and glory. Help us to trust in your coming, even when the world seems to be falling apart all around us. By the power of your Holy Spirit, give us the strength to stand up and look for Jesus when he comes, the God Emmanuel who is with us. Lord, you know that we get weighed down by the worries of our lives, just as the disciples did. Speak to us through your Word read and proclaimed so that we discern the truth that exposes what is false in our society. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock, our Redeemer and our God, Emmanuel. Amen.

Last Sunday I went to see the movie 2012, based on the myth that the Mayan Calendar predicts the end of the world on December 21, 2012, the winter solstice. Actually, the Mayan Calendar does not make that prediction, but myths and false representations take on a life of their own once the rumors fly. In the world of blogs, Wikipedia, Twitter, My Space and U-Tube, what is true and false is not always easy to discern. Then again, truth has never been easy to discern. If you are interested, you might enjoy reading the 2012 article on Wikipedia. If you are more adventurous, Google 2012 and learn about other apocalyptic predictions, including the arrival of the mythical planet Nibiru and other insights from New Age prophets who channel aliens.

A book which debunks the 2012 myths will be published on December 21st, but NASA and other scientists decided to address the 2012 myth head-on. Why repeat another Y2K scare like we had in the year 2000?

As a pastor, I have mixed emotions about the movie 2012. It does have a hero who tries to do good. There is a John the Baptist type prophet named Charlie who dresses funny, lives in the wilderness, eats pickles, calls people to repent and appears to enjoy the fire and brimstone.

The movie has a somber beginning. The world’s leading scientists and leaders address dire predictions of catastrophic worldwide disaster. As things progress, the movie makes sure one does not take it seriously. It combines the thrilling action of a fast paced video game with enough romance, family drama and heroism to widen its appeal.

For those who paid a billion dollars or were lucky enough to be invited aboard space-age arks, there was a happy ending, even if the continents of the world were moved around. Most people died helplessly, including Christians in America, Catholics in Rome, Hindus in India and the Dali Lama in Tibet. A good remnant survived, but there was no Christ. Typical of society today, faith is placed in human action, not in God Emmanuel.

I chose not to see The Road, a movie based on a novel by Cormac McCarthy. Although it has received good reviews, the movie sounds too dark for my taste (CBS Sunday Morning, 11/22/09). The setting has no green because the earth is dying. Viewers can project their own reasons for its demise. In bleak gray and brown tones, a father tries to save his son from starvation and from cannibalistic gangs that travel the road looking for people to eat. The man seems to move forward blindly for the sake of his child, but the road might lead to nowhere. The father kills and punishes brutally, while the son gives voice to mercy and compassion. Unless one of you lets me know, I suppose I will have to read the book or see the movie to find out how it ends. A movie critic described The Road as an evocative downer and not for those with a weak stomach for violence.

Some say Americans today are obsessed with apocalyptic visions(CBS Sunday Morning, 11/22/09). Movies, television series and books deal with one form of apocalypse after another. It might be aliens, evil conspirators or the anti-Christ. Robert Weinland, author of 2008: God's Final Witness, predicts the end of the world on May 27, 2012. According to Weinland, the first trumpet of the Seventh Seal in the Book of Revelation sounded on December 14, 2008. Our economic woes are just the beginning. The United States will fall, and World War III will destroy the world as we know it. Google 2012 and you will find that Weinland is only one of many who claim to know the future.

My friends, this is not the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is darkness; and we are children of the light. Jesus warned the disciples about all the worries and disasters that might distract them from seeing the Kingdom of God draw near. Jesus warned them that people and nations become confused and fearful when natural disasters occur. God breaks into their midst, but people are too afraid to notice.

How many times have we seen God at work, especially when disaster strikes or a crisis occurs? Are we afraid right now? Then hear the Good News.

As Christians we raise our heads when times get tough. Our redemption is near. The Kingdom of God breaks through despair, whatever its cause, to bring hope. God Emmanuel is coming. God came to the Israelites in Egypt. God came to the exiles in Babylonia. God has come throughout history; and God will come again. God came into the world as Jesus Christ over two thousand years ago. God continues to come to the world through disciples like you and me. This is what we celebrate at Christmas.

In their anthem the choir challenged us to carry the light of Christ into the world – into the world of school, work and family, into the world of economic hardship, addiction, illness, disappointment, rejection, grief and death. God wants us to bring light to those who have lost hope. Sometimes we need to receive more light ourselves.

When life gets difficult and the world seems dark and falling apart, we are called by Christ to stand up, lift our heads and be alert. Jesus tells us to pray for strength so that we can stand before the Son of Man, whom we know in Jesus Christ.

Years ago during the Cold War, American children had periodic drills in school known as “duck and cover” (Homiletics, 11/29/09, 44). Someone decided that ducking and covering heads would help students survive a nuclear bomb blast. The drills were discontinued because all they produced was anxiety.

Duck and cover strategies still abound. Buy this, invest here, study that, drink this, get this treatment, take that pill, complete this degree, marry well, get that job, buy, consume, invest, work harder ... No matter what we do, we will face challenges that are beyond our ability to control. We will experience rejection, loss and death. Disasters will happen. Crises will occur.

During Advent Christians do not duck and cover. We stand confidently and raise our heads to see the God who comes in Jesus Christ: God, Emmanuel. May God bless you this Advent. May you experience the Kingdom of God drawing near. Amen.