

## Sermon for December 2, 2018 – “Hoping Against Hope”

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent Year C – Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

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Jesus was speaking about the end times to the disciples...In doing so, He says something to them.....something a little strange.

He says: **“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away...“...until all things have taken place.”**

As people of faith.....we like to believe.....that there’s complete correlation...

...between what Jesus says and what will happen.

But this statement’s a difficult one.....almost cryptic...

**“This generation will not pass away...“...until all things have taken place.”**

How then – as the oft-asked question goes – shall we live?

**“Be on guard...be alert,”** our Lord advises us.....in no uncertain terms.....in today’s reading from near the end of the Gospel of Luke. Odd advice, we might be tempted to think.....at the beginning of yet another Advent season. A time when we’re more inclined to anticipate the joy of the coming Christmas season.....than to be on guard against unspecified perils or threats.

Still, mindfulness is indeed Jesus’ admonishment to us this day. Pay attention to the details.....to the signs about you.

**“Be on guard...be alert.”** And, this is perhaps good advice after all.

The world is still full of surprises.....and not all of them are pleasant. Just catch the latest news on the internet or television.....if you have any doubts. The **“distress among the nations”** of which Jesus also speaks.....is with us still...though the names and boundaries of the nations in question.....may have changed a bit over the years.

Conflicts and wars remain with us today as in centuries past. The “fear and foreboding” of which Jesus warns.....are as real and deep as ever. The very first followers of Jesus believed..... that the end times were about to happen.....that no sooner than Jesus had ascended into heaven.....that he’d be back. As the days slowly dragged by.....and then months and then years.....and then the generations.....the followers of Jesus had a problem. Even now – almost 2,000 years later – we **still** have a problem. Jesus had said that these things would occur.....before this generation had passed away. But then that generation had passed away. They’re gone.....and have been gone for quite a while now. Jesus still hasn’t returned. What are we to make of that?

The better question might be...What was that next generation to make of that?

How were they to understand the idea of the end times.....and the promise of the coming of the Son of Man?

How are **we** supposed to make any real sense of this?

Was Jesus just giving false hope? We say, “of course not!” But when mass shootings, natural disasters and such take place.....don’t we wonder.....even if just a little bit?

Actually – I’d say more than a little bit. Books on the so-called “end times”.....are more popular than ever. I think the current fascination began in 1995.....when the “Left Behind” series first appeared. Remember that?

There were something like 16 books.....four movies.....and several video games. But even before then.....people have been trying to predict.....when the end times would happen.....and what it all would look like. So far, no one’s managed to bet it right.....some have been wrong multiple times. Still, this doesn’t mean that these aren’t important questions. They are and I’ll return to them in a moment. But first – a little context. As we know – today’s the first Sunday of Advent. It’s the beginning of the new church year. It’s a season where we’re reminded of what we are.....and that is a people waiting for the Advent of our God.....which is to say.....the coming (the return) of our God. We’re a people who’re meant to live filled with hope.....to “stand up and raise our heads...“...because our redemption is drawing near.” We’re to live believing this.....that Jesus is coming in great power and glory.

With all this in mind.....let’s go back to those questions about what Jesus might have been saying.....when he declared that...**“This generation will not pass away...“...until all things have taken place.”** I want to preface what I’m about to say.....by affirming my belief.....that at some future point in time.....when God will fulfil his promise to renew all things.....a time when Jesus will come again and dwell among us. I also want to state for the record.....that Jesus Himself was pretty clear.....that the details of this aren’t for us to know.

In Matthew, Jesus says this...

**“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. “Heaven and earth will pass away – but my words will not pass away. “But about that day and hour no one knows...“Neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son – but only the Father.**

Now, having said this.....I also remind you of Jesus’ promise to send the Holy Spirit.....and thus be present to us and us to him during our lives.

So, while He may not be here **physically**.....we nevertheless believe that through the Holy Spirit.....Jesus is here with us.....meeting us in this time and space.

It’s for this reason I say.....that there’s a timelessness about Jesus coming and the signs which surround it. If we were to travel back in time.....if we were to set the “way back machine” to the first century.....and meet some of those early Christians...

...I’ve no doubt that they Christians would’ve been feeling that they were living in the end times.....with all that was going on.

Most Biblical scholars place the writing of Luke’s gospel.....after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in the year 70.....almost 40 years after Jesus ascension.....which is certainly more than a generation. The early Christians were experiencing persecution under the Roman emperor Nero.....and the sacking of the Temple. Not unlike the time of the Exile several hundred years earlier.....the Jewish world was in chaos and turmoil.

Jesus’ words in Luke’s gospel.....would’ve been a reminder of the hope.....and promise of their faith. Jesus was going to return.....and all things would be well. But when I look around.....or read the news.....it doesn’t seem like much has really changed. Seriously.....here we are almost 2,000 years.....and countless generations later.....and it still feels like the end times are upon us. Now, we Americans may

currently be somewhat immune.....to much of the great suffering happening around the world.....to the point where we may hear about something.....whatever it is.....shake our heads and say...“Gee, that’s too bad!” But if we take Jesus seriously.....and most of us would say we do...I really don’t think we can! I think we owe it to ourselves...

...certainly to Jesus.....and to those who are suffering.....to pay attention to what’s going on. We should be no less confronted and convicted.....by the signs of the times around us. I mean come on...There are so many places where there’s armed conflict...So many places where violence is an everyday occurrence...So many places where people feel like it’s the end of the world. Some Christians – some not.....yet **all** beloved children of God. It’s in the context of the suffering .....and the confusion.....to look beyond our own capacities as human beings. It’s here that we must look beyond our limited faculties and imaginations.....and look to the God who raised Jesus from dead.....thus declaring that what we see and experience.....however terrible.....are not and will not be.....the final word. This is our hope as Christians. And when we pray “on earth as it is in heaven”.....we long for that hope to be made real **now...right** now.....and to come in all its fullness. Who doesn’t feel frustrated..... or even a little frightened.....by the enormity of the suffering that confronts humankind. Who hasn’t asked how much worse things to get? Who hasn’t wondered what needs to happen before God steps in once again? Seriously...!

**“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.”**

Really? Is that it? Surely, here – in our life time – we’re seeing the things of which Jesus spoke. Well, maybe. Then again – maybe not. It’s not up to us. But the fact that we’ve noticed what’s happening around us.....all the evil in the world.....should tell us something. That we’re blind us to these realities.....as follows of Christ.....should speak to us differently. It should in fact, act as a sirens call.....a call to take part in the mission and ministry of God in Christ.....which pits us against all of that.

You see, we’re an Advent people.....called to live expectantly.....expressing our hope for God’s future...We’re to be living as if that promised future is already here.....not dictated to by our present sufferings.....but informed by the vision of what God has in store for us.....for all of creation.

Advent.....if nothing else.....is a season of hope. Even though at times it may seem.....as if we are hoping against hope. It’s a time that reminds us.....that in God’s scheme of things.....the laws of entropy.....essentially that everything’s dissolving into chaos..... don’t necessarily apply. It reminds us that the suffering.....the dying.....the fear.....will not go on forever. Our spiritual winter will come to an end. The fig tree of which Jesus speaks.....will again blossom and bloom. “Summer is near,” our Lord reassures us.....even at the beginning of Advent. “Our redemption is drawing near.” over the long haul – things can get a little discouraging. Jesus knows this. It’s why He warns us to “Be on guard...be alert.”

**Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down...“...with overindulgence and drunkenness and the worries of this life...”**

He knew we’d be tempted.....either to give in to the discouragement and fear.....or to inure ourselves against them. In other words.....it’ll be an Advent to test what we really believe. Yep, the world’s going to hell in a handbasket.....and – for the most part –

people will respond the only way they know how.....fighting fire with fire. Yet we in the church believe.....that the kingdom of God is the greater reality.....even at this very moment. We believe that the kingdom.....is spreading like yeast in dough. It's like a seed germinating.....and sending down roots silently in the soil. We believe Jesus HAS come once.....and WILL come again.

We believe that what we do.....how we pray.....how we worship.....how we preach in especially times of fear and tumult.....must bear witness to our fervent belief.....in the power of Jesus to overcome the world.....to the light of Christ to shine in the darkness.

In some ways – given the state of things.....in the world and in many of our lives...

...Christmas may not feel very merry. What's more the words "Merry Christmas"...

...may even stick in our throats a bit. It may feel more like an effort to gloss over the world's mayhem.....or a bit of wishful thinking.....than a genuine expression from our hearts.

Even so – that's okay. But then – we seek the deeper things of joy...

...not mere happiness. We seek to celebration the coming of peace...

...the culmination of hope.....the nativity of love.....and the incarnation of a grace...

...that alone can save us from **our** sins.....and the world from its addiction to violence and evil.

We seek something more profound...

...than that which is merely "merry."

And thankfully in the good news of the gospel...

...in the Word made flesh...

...we have that something, too.

May we be strengthened by the hope of Jesus Christ this day...

...and all throughout Advent...

...may it draw us all into a future that continues to unfold.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen and amen.