

He Comes, Bearing Gifts: Hope Trumps Optimism!

A sermon based on Luke 21:25-36.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We've hit December, the decorations are starting to go up, the Christmas music is playing everywhere, Christmas parties are occurring all over town, so I guess we can officially start talking about it, right? What are you hoping for for Christmas? Are you optimistic you'll get it? Is there even a difference?

I mean, what do you think of when you hear the word "hope"? In the thesaurus, it's actually a synonym for optimism...a desire for some favorable future outcome. Like, knowing me and my sweet spot for sports, especially football, and especially the Green Bay Packers, I could say, "I hope the Packers make the playoffs" or "I'm optimistic that the Packers will make the playoffs." Again, is there a difference? Or, "I hope our winter this year is mild" vs. "I'm optimistic that our winter will be mild."

Do you hear the subtle nuances? On one side, I "hope" means I'm not sure but I really would like this, whereas I'm "optimistic" tends to exude a bit more confidence that this will happen, although there's still a bit of uncertainty. I can be optimistic about the Packer's playoff push or the winter being mild, and those things may happen...or they may not. Is that your understanding, too?

Well, today, we're beginning a new Church Year with the season of Advent. And at first glance, you might not notice much of a difference between this and the End Times, where we just were, especially listening to the Scripture readings for today. The readings are similar because the themes for the two seasons are similar. Now, as we prepare for the coming of the Christ-child, we certainly can't neglect making sure we're prepared for his second coming at the end of time. His second coming is something we look forward to, only because we know what happened in his first coming.

And what's somewhat odd, as we think about that, is the word Scripture uses to describe the way we wait for that time. We wait in hope. In Scripture, "hope" is actually stronger than optimism, because it's always connected with the promises of God, promises that can't be broken. We said optimism is a desire for a favorable future outcome. Advent is all about the future! But we Christians have more than optimism that our future is bright. Jesus brings us the gift of hope – certain hope – because that hope - our hope - is rooted in the promises of God, some of which are shared in our verses this morning.

Now, in those verses, we're looking at Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus had been spending a lot of time at the temple. And if you go to the beginning of this chapter, what his disciples were doing...they were admiring the temple's beauty. But then Jesus, the Debbie Downer, warned it would be destroyed. And that launched into a discourse where Jesus started describing the signs of the End Times, which we studied only a few weeks ago...again, wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, a whole slew of natural disasters.

You can easily find studies online demonstrating how America has been involved in some sort of war or conflict in 93% of the years of its existence. Worldwide, there has never been a year where nations didn't rise against nations. There has never been a year without natural disasters. Jesus' point in providing such signs is the end could be any moment.

But then he got to some more signs in our verse for this morning, ***“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory... Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”***

These signs seem to be signs reserved for the absolute end: an unpinning, a release of the forces holding the universe and earth together. And Jesus brings the signs listed earlier in the chapter and the ones listed here together in his fig tree illustration. Did you understand it? You can tell the season of summer is coming by looking at the signs in the trees, like lilac blossoms or birch tree blossoms or crab apple blossoms. Likewise, when we look at the world and its events, we can tell the “season” of Christ’s second coming is not too far off. At any moment, we could see the stars fall, the oceans drain, and the Son of Man returning.

Is that how you’re living? Are you living like the end could come at any moment? I mean, Jesus says, ***“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life.”***

What’s weighing down your heart? Is it anxiety? You know, one of the causes of anxiety is the inability to see an eventual “out.” There is this belief that some bad will go on perpetually, so you’re constantly worrying about this or that...bills, health problems, relationships. And even though Jesus promises all that is “bad” will come to an end, are those promises what you remember or are you too focused on the problems? Well, if you recognized and held on to Jesus’ promises, it would alleviate anxiety, so maybe that answers the question for you.

Or is it this “carousing” or “drunkenness”? The Greek word translated as “carousing” here can refer to the nausea or headache one gets from drinking too much. More metaphorically, it could refer to any sort of over-indulgence in the world. You might not have an issue with getting literally drunk. But could “carousing” and “drunkenness” here be your way of trying to escape you anxiety and worrying...sins you fall into to make the negative thoughts go away?

Or, “carousing” and “drunkenness” could simply be the activities of a person who believes happiness can be found in ignoring God’s law and gratifying the flesh. Either way, the end result for the individual: they live with a heart “weighted down” with guilt and fear, sensing at least on a sub-conscious level that there will be a reckoning.

The reckoning will be with the Son. In his second coming, Christ will not be weak like a baby. He will not even be meek, as he was in his passive obedience. Even here, when he says, “Truly I tell you,” he’s not quoting one of the prophets, who spoke with authority given to them by God. Jesus speaks with authority as God. And with authority as God, he will reassumed the full use of his power and glory and will use it to the delight of believers and devastation of unbelievers.

And still, in spite of that, do you live like the end of the world is coming? Are you watching, living in a way that shows you’re ready and prepared for when Jesus returns?

Because I think of, like, the story *The Night Before Christmas*...how the stockings were hung by the chimney with care in hope that St. Nicholas soon would be there...and that's for something, that in the long run, really doesn't matter. But today, how easy is it for us to have a similar mindset, where we're getting caught up in the trappings of the world and what's temporary, while being, I guess you could say, rather nonchalant about what we'll be like when Jesus comes.

Why is that? The signs are all there. It could be any time. We don't want to be living like those who reject Jesus as Christ when he does.

"Truly I tell you," Jesus says. And as he speaks, those words don't instill any fear in you or me...because what else does he say? ***"Truly I tell you...heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."***

With those words, Jesus gives us a promise which gives us certain and confident hope. "My words will never pass away." Can you see how? Everything God has promised...everything Jesus ever said...is true.

Do you remember this? I handed out these "God's Yellow Pages" a couple of months ago. There are still some extras on the table in the back of church. This is full of God's promises – his true promises – for problems that come up in your life.

Like, when you're feeling anxious, ***"Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).*** Or, ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28,29).***

When friends fail, Psalm 41, ***"Even my close friend, whom I trusted...has lifted up his heel against me. But you, O LORD, have mercy on me; raise me up, that I may repay them. I know that you are pleased with me, for my enemy does not triumph over me. In my integrity you uphold me and set me in your presence forever."***

When you feel like those turmoil everywhere you turn in life, ***"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).***

And you know, for every problem, Scripture has a promise. But what about for the even greater problem? The even more "troubling situation" or fact we haven't lived with the expectation that the end could be soon. We have let worldly living and anxiety enter our lives. We've lived in sin. What about for that? Jesus has words to say about paying for that sin of ours: ***"It is finished."*** Those words will never pass away...because those are the words of God who came down to earth as a man, who lived as a perfect man, but who gave up that perfection on the cross – gave it to us while he took on our sins – and by his death paid our sin-debt in full. It is finished! That promise is forever because Jesus rose and lives and rules in heaven forever.

And knowing those promises of Christ is what gives us hope. You see, the line between those who have hope in Christ and those who do not is clear. The evidence will be by how they respond on Judgment Day. For those who have no hope in Christ or his promises, that day people will faint in terror. There will be perplexity, people having no clue what to do to escape what is happening. Those who haven't fainted will look for a place to hide...with nowhere to run.

But those who have hope? Different story. "You know that the kingdom of God is near." Thus, believers will not hide. Believers will watch the fireworks without fear. Why? They know "**your redemption is drawing near.**" We know our redemption is drawing near.

So, then, having this hope, what are we going to do in this time between the two comings of Christ? "**Be careful,**" Jesus says. Be alert to where you are. Acknowledge the temptations before you, know which ones are especially hard for you, and avoid them. Be mindful of your ongoing need to be strengthened by Word and sacrament. Don't neglect what sustains your faith and life.

"**Watch,**" Jesus says. Literally, don't be sleeping. But be alert like you were standing guard on a night watch. Live with the expectation, "Today is the day Christ comes back." And don't let the passing of days where he doesn't lull you asleep.

And finally, "**pray,**" Jesus says. That's one of the ways we stay alert. We talk to God daily, asking him to give us all we need "**to stand before the Son of Man**" one day.

"I hope." You know, the way I typically was Packer games is later in the evening, after the game's already done and the outcome's already been decided. It's weird know it's already over and I might not know how it turns out (while so many others do), and so as I'm watching, there are moments of pure elation and moments of sheer frustration, waiting to see that final outcome.

That's life here too. There is still suffering and strife, even for (sometimes especially for) the believer. And we have our moments of pure elation and sheer frustration. But we know how it already turns out. In the end, Jesus wins. We win. And so, now, we are able to endure and live joyful, purposeful lives...because we don't just have optimism. We have hope for the future. Hope – this precious gift from Jesus – that enables us to sing, "When the saints go marching, oh when the saints go marching in," not, "Lord, I want to be in that number." It's "Lord, I'm gonna be in that number." That's our hope. That's our certainty. Amen.