

Luke 21:25-36  
December 1, 2024

## The Lord Is Near

We enter the season of Advent and focus on one of the most well-known of the biblical stories, Christ's birth, and its anticipation. We begin with an emphasis on the message of hope, which can be seen in the gospel text. Jesus has completed his sermon on the end times and it appears to be a warning, but it is a hopeful warning because it is not a destruction that is at hand, but a groundbreaking.

"Look at the fig tree," Jesus says, ". . . and all the trees. When they sprout their leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so when you see, "these things," happening (by that he means, what he has just described), you know that Kingdom of God is near."

Jesus concludes by saying, "Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand, before the Son of Man." It is not our condemnation to which we are going, but our redemption. Jesus speaks of summer coming and God's kingdom, which is as sure as the flowering of spring.

It has always been the tradition among the faithful to look into the face of dire circumstances and see hopeful outcomes. This can happen in a personal life, in a community or nation, or in world history.

It has also been the tradition among the faithful to look into the face of triumphant and happy circumstances and know that the good times we experience are transitory, not the source of the hope we profess; we know that our redemption is not related to the circumstances. From whence comes this hope, this "persistent in the face of trouble" hope, that is yet not naively giddy about the wonderful things in life or in history?

We should be realistic about the interpretation of the world that comes to us in the bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New, both in the stories about Israel *and* the stories about the origins of the Christian faith, about Jesus and his followers, including the birth.

By realistic, I mean that in faith, we never give up on things, even in the perceived and real threats that characterize the world's life, and that threaten us in our personal lives. Conversely, we do not indulge in what turns out to be false hopes when things seem to be going well, and the life of the world is characterized by success and growth and progress, and the general belief that problems are being solved. It is a level-headed hope. That is what I mean by realistic. *Why do we hope? Why is hope a central biblical conviction? What is its source?*

Let us first speak of what it is not. It does not come from human beings, from their discoveries or their accomplishments or any of their actions or opinions.

It does not come from the things they invent or make or from the systems and processes they create, or in their organizations, even the democratic ones or the ones that seem more efficient, all of which make what turn out to be false promises that will fail to solve the dilemmas of life both at the personal and community level.

It does not come from a reorganization of society, or from an education, meant to provide the knowledge needed to negotiate the times.

We are specifically told not to put our trust in princes (and that means presidents, and I am afraid, preachers), or in the supposed essential goodness of human beings. It is sometimes tempting to make ourselves feel better by attaching our hopes to technology or the cumulative affects of billions of people being good enough. Rather, we are told to put our hope in the Lord.

At times when things are at their worst, or we fear they are about to be, this admonition makes good sense, but often it seems like mere wishful thinking, which is in the end is no substitute for genuine hope. And we are meant to hope in the Lord even when we think everything is good.

Let me suggest a couple of things; life is precarious and vulnerable even in the good times. The end is always near. Though one might despair of the message that life is always vulnerable, we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory, failures of love

and justice abound and death knocks at the door, it is a message of grace because it tells us a necessary truth.

We also know in the presence of evil and at the worst times, there is also goodness and beauty and love and there are happy times and the possibility that circumstances could improve, as they often do.

It is significant that the bible was written in difficult times, but is to be understood and believed as a message for all the times, and for all people, even in the times of ease and pleasure, when hope is easy.

It speaks to us of the universal conditions of our humanity, regardless of the historical period or the specific circumstances of our personal lives. Every year at Advent we are asked to set aside these things if we can and search for a more genuine hope, one with a more secure foundation.

We are asked to consider that God's grace is ever-present and has demonstrated that the universal conditions of humanity do not get the last word. The last word is found in Christ Jesus, who came to those who have little and who have have much, to those who succeed by earthly standards, and those who fail, to those who live in good historical periods and those who live in bad ones.

The message of the bible is the message of God's conquering love. It is the reason we anticipate and celebrate the birth of Jesus.

The reason we are thankful for all of life's blessings is not because of the blessings themselves - okay, maybe a little - but because they are signs that point us to God's ever-present *grace, which is our hope.*

So let us be faithful because God is faithful. A life of faithful watching will keep us from discouragement in the bad times and naive overconfidence in the good. And do not be discouraged by the state of the world or by our own failures or those of others. Nor let us be naively hopeful or fooled when things are going well and there are many apparent successes.

May we always be thankful, because God both blesses our daily lives and promises eternal life, and works in us especially in the hard experiences of life which build perseverance and character . . . and hope that does not disappoint.

Let us always pursue the good without being overconfident in our own potential to achieve it, or transactional, only really pursuing it when we believe it can be achieved, but because it is God's will for us to pursue it.

One of my favorite scriptures comes from Paul's Letter to the Philippians, it is familiar enough, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice," then, "let your gentleness be evident to everyone . . ." It is especially known for its exhortation not to be anxious about anything, and its promise that God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. But it is to the brief sentence that immediately follows the command

to rejoice and gentleness that I want to draw your attention, "The Lord is near."

The Lord is near! The Kingdom of God is at hand is the way Jesus put it. That is the message of the season. Whether we anticipate his birth, his abiding presence, his Passion or his Return, we know that his presence is the source of our hope.

And finally, in the epistle reading from 1 Thessalonians, Paul, gives us this blessing, let it serve as a benediction, for it speaks to us of the implications of our hope, "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, . . . May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

## Romans 6:15-23

15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! 16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey— whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. 18 You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

19 I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. 20 When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. 21 What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! 22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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