

The First Sunday in Advent
St. Luke 21:25-36

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Redemption draws near when Christ is present...when Jesus begins to happen and is happening. Advent is a sort of beginning:

- It's the beginning of the Church Year. This, in fact, is the first day of the new Church Year.
- It's the start of looking at Jesus beginning to happen as He first came in the flesh. Being about a month out from Christmas, you might imagine looking at Mary and her belly, eight months along, and seeing the Kingdom of God right there in her womb.
- It's the preparation and the beginning again of preparing for Jesus to happen for the last time as He comes again to judge the living and the dead. Looking back at His first coming is always done with a view toward expecting His Second Coming.

Jesus coming and being present is the nearness of your redemption.

The counter to that is when Christ is not present, redemption is nowhere near. And, lest I'm not clear, in His omnipresence, Jesus the Christ, in His full humanity and full divinity, is everywhere He wants to be. When I say, “when Christ is not present,” what I mean to say is where Christ is excluded.

Now, you have an idea of those places where Jesus Christ, in every bit of His anointed-ness, is outwardly excluded, such as among the Jews and Muslims or any number of false religions. In those places, among those people, let me boldly say, redemption is not drawing near. But, even among supposed Christians, in places where one would think Jesus Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed, the risk is run that Christ would be excluded, even if only covertly or naïvely.

You hear it in places where self-help is preached. You hear it in places where God-accepts-you-no-matter-what-you-do-or-believe is preached. You hear it in places where Jesus as a great example or teacher is preached. In every case, Jesus is pushed aside, mentioned only in regards to His day and age on earth, forgotten, ignored—the Gospel is not proclaimed. And if the Gospel is not proclaimed, then the Law will not be either, at least in its judgmental strength. As Martin Luther wrote in his Large Catechism, “[W]here Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Ghost who creates, calls, and gathers the Christian Church, without which no one can come to Christ the Lord;” (LC III.45, Triglot) and what he means by Christ being preached is the preaching of Jesus, the Son of God, crucified for the forgiveness of sins, and that you are justified freely for the sake of Jesus Christ without any merit or worthiness of your own.

Outside of the preaching of Christ crucified, the Law becomes little more than a self-help guide, the post upon which you are told to look to see just how good you can be. Redemption is something you work out, earned with a litany of good works which you lay out before God. But Jesus is not part of the equation. If He is not proclaimed as the antidote or medicine for sin, as the forgiveness of sins, there is no proclamation of the Law to show you your sin and kill your sinfulness in you. In this case, His merits are not applied to you, given to you, made to be your cover; in fact, with this kind of preaching, they are not wanted.

This idea of self-help has become such an ingrained part of the American make-up. It's the chief part of American rugged individualism. The rugged individual can make it on His own. He doesn't need anyone's help for anything, and when it comes to faith and religion, the rugged individual doesn't need anyone's help for redemption. They might believe in Jesus, in a Jesus, but don't really see any kind of need for Him. “Hey, this Jesus guy is pretty neat, but I can make it on my own.”

Even in times of increasing welfare, government handouts, and entitlements (and perhaps, in a time of greater need for them), the idea of being self-made is held up as the pinnacle of success. Those who receive welfare, even those who inherited their wealth are not seen as successful, especially compared to those who pulled themselves out of poverty to self-made millions and billions. And though

you may be part of a church body that has its origins in feudal Europe, as an American, you are instilled with the idea of honor and praise for the rugged individual—you hear his call in the back of your mind, that you, too, can make it on your own. Old Adam loves this rugged individual voice; he will use it to prove to you that you don't need God and His Son, Jesus Christ. Neither does anyone else, Old Adam would say.

What one thinks of and acts like at funerals and their receptions is telling in this regard. Is the funeral a celebration of life where the deceased is praised for how good of a person they were or is it a celebration of Life (capital-L) where Jesus is praised for the eternal life granted to the deceased with an eager expectation of the resurrection of all the dead? Now, I won't speak against remembering the good done by the deceased and remembering their successes, especially at a reception, but that should never be the primary focus. The primary focus in remembering one who has died in Christ should be that they were baptized, were redeemed, were forgiven, were restored, were clothed in Christ's righteousness, were a believer for the sake and work of Jesus Christ. (Or, how about this: change all of those "weres" to "ares".) How you talk about the dead says much about what you believe with regard to Jesus Christ, and His work of salvation, and even how one achieves or receives their standing before God.

The sad fact for those who follow false religions and learn to follow false messiahs is that Jesus is returning. The same can be said for those who claim the name Christian, but hold to a theology of glory which is a theology of self-help. Jesus is coming again, and when He comes, it will be the end. Those who trusted in themselves for redemption will see, first-hand, the fruit of their labors. They amount to nothing—all of your faithless, righteous deeds are as a filthy, blood-stained rag that is to be tossed away as refuse. (cf. Isaiah 64:6) "But, Lord," they will say, "we have done all of these things for you. See how holy and righteous we have been." And Jesus will reply,

And I died for you, shed my blood and gave my life for you. I said, 'It is finished;' you did not have to do anything. I sent my Holy Spirit to you to give you the merits of my perfect life, death, and resurrection, and you wanted nothing of Him and them. Remember, 'Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven...'" (Matthew 7:21) I do not know you.

So, Jesus says in today's text,

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And 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, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

It's a frightful scene. And certainly, it will be for those who trusted in themselves for redemption. However, not so for those whose trust solely in Jesus, who is coming in a cloud, for redemption.

Jesus does not come to burden His people. He has come not to burden anyone, and He comes again not to burden. He has come with succor and will come again as the Great Redeemer, to bring with Him His Bride into glory, who will see Him with their own eyes, and not another. (cf. Job 19:27) If the people are burdened, they are burdened by the guilt of their own sin, to which they cling, seeking only in themselves the way out from under it.

But not so those who are baptized, are redeemed, are forgiven, are restored, are clothed in Christ's righteousness, are a believer for the sake and work of Jesus Christ. When Christ comes again in a cloud after the frightening signs in the sun, moon, and stars, through the distress of nations and perplexity, despite the roaring of the waves and the failing of men's hearts—once the heavens will be shaken—the redeemed of God will rejoice, because Jesus is returning, because redemption draws near.

Dr. Martin Luther put it this way,

But those who have the "prudence of the spirit" love the will of God and welcome it because they are conformed to it. Hence although they know that this is God's will, that there be a final judgment and that all things will

be filled with horror and His wrath will be known, yet they are not afraid, but await it with joy and hope that it will come soon. Thus that which to others is the greatest horror is to them the highest joy, because with perfectly attuned wills they desire the same thing that God desires. For wherever there is this will, there will be neither sorrow nor dread but rather the fulfillment of what one has longed for and wanted and the quiet achievement of one's desire. Psalm 97:8 reads: "The daughters of Judah rejoice because of Thy judgments, O God."

And our Lord, when He had predicted the terrors of the Day of Judgment, added these words: "Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (AE, 25 p. 354)

"But those who have the 'prudence of the spirit' love the will of God and welcome it because they are conformed to it," Luther wrote. How are those who have the 'prudence of the spirit' conformed? By nothing else than the coming of Jesus! And this is exactly what the prophet Malachi wrote:

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 4:2-3)

Dear hearers, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near. Yes, the end is near...nearer than it has ever been. However, for the right here and right now, look to your own pasts and realize this present reality: the Word of God was applied to simple water, and you are Baptized. You were joined by this most holy washing to Jesus Christ's perfect life, death, and resurrection. Therefore, you have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer you who live, but Christ lives in you, and the life you now live in the flesh, you live by faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave Himself for you. (cf. Galatians 2:20) There at the font, you were given the Holy Spirit and you were given faith to trust in the Son of God for your salvation. Verily, you were given Jesus, and so your redemption has drawn near in your washing.

Dear hearers, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near. Yes, the end is near...nearer than it has ever been. However, for the right here and right now, to you is proclaimed that Jesus is present. You heard Him as the Scripture was read, especially in today's Introit: "Behold, thy King cometh unto thee: He is just, and having salvation." (Zechariah 9:9) You hear Him now, even as my own voice is making this proclamation to you. You hear it as you live out your baptismal lives, confessing your sins in God-given repentance and hearing the words of Holy Absolution. Jesus is come in His Word—hidden, though perceived with the eyes and ears of faith. He is verily present in the Word, and so your redemption has drawn near in your hearing.

Dear hearers, look up and raise up your heads, because your redemption draws near. Yes, the end is near...nearer than it has ever been. However, for right here and right now, gaze upon the altar and see the bread and the wine. Jesus joins Himself to these ordinary elements in order to give Himself to you: body as bread and bread as body, blood as wine and wine as blood. In the Sacrament of the Altar, Jesus is happening for you, and you receive Him in your mouths—hidden, though perceived only by faith—for forgiveness, life, salvation, and so your redemption draws near in your eating and drinking.

"Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Frightening things are happening, and will continue to happen, even get worse. Rejoice and be glad; these things will fade away and cease, and Jesus is happening—He is here, now, for you—and He will never cease: "[T]he word of the LORD endures forever." (1 Peter 1:25) And whenever the Word has His way with you, your redemption draws near to you, even as right now, right in this place, your redemption draws near to you, and so you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.