

Gospel: Luke 21:25-36

God will fulfill God's purposes and, already, hidden signs of that fulfillment abound. On that great day there will be dismay, perplexity, confusion, and terror, but God's people shall be given strength to stand boldly and receive God's promised redemption.

[Jesus said:] ²⁵“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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴“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, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be 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.”

So, this morning as we begin the season of Advent, we recognize that we are already in the second day of December, and we are now in the thick of the secular Christmas culture being played out in our society. When we view the world around us, it is easy to see how the church season and message of Advent can become drowned out. Commercials, store displays, and radio stations have shifted into full mode, since we hit 12:01AM on Halloween night, if not before. There is a Christmas song that is familiar to all of us, in fact I would guess that everyone of us in this room know it. It is a secular song, that could be maybe called an advent hymn with just a little tweaking. Although, to be honest, it does not talk about God, or about the coming of Jesus, or about the Christian hope. The song is loved by millions of people - especially by children. It is a song that speaks about the coming of an important person, a person who knows us and our every action, a person who is good and loving and who expects us to be the same.

Have you guessed it already? The song is "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town" For a world no longer accustomed to reading the scriptures, "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town" summarizes the Advent message in a secular way - all that remains to be done, and it is something that as Christians we can do - is substitute the name of Jesus for the name of red costumed guy and we would then have, in lyrical form, the essence of what the Gospel tells us about the return of Christ and how we should be ready for it. Perhaps, however, with a slightly different outlook.

Imagine yourself as a child for a moment - a child from a reasonably normal, healthy and loving Christian home. Do you remember what your parents or grandparents, did around the house during most of December? Remember what happened at that time of year? How the house was

decorated, and lights were hung up, a tree trimmed, and baking - scads of baking was done: cookies in the shape of everything including sprinkles, chocolate, candy, and all the sugar one could dream of? Think of how it seemed everyone around you was doing things that they often never did at any other time of year. They wished people "Merry Christmas" and smiled a lot. And people came visiting - and how they came visiting, some of whom you never saw again till next Christmas. Do you remember what it meant at this time of year to look forward to Christmas? To think about the coming of the gift giving big man and how everything would be wonderful when he came - and that you would get lots of good things from him and everyone would be happy?

I may be off base here, because I am thinking of my own experience of the Christmas season back then, but in the back of your mind - almost unconsciously - you knew even then as a child, that what you did, or did not do, probably didn't make a great difference. That somehow and in some way, what really counted with your mom and dad, and then of course with white bearded cookie eater, was that somehow it would all get worked out. Things really didn't worry you all that much, even when you heard the lyrics of the song that included phrases like: "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, He's making a list, checking it twice; He's gonna find out Who's naughty and nice. He sees you when you're sleeping, He knows when you're awake, He knows if you've been bad or good; So be good for goodness sake!"

For the most part, it didn't worry you - because in the back of your mind, you knew that the overwhelming sentiment from all the television specials and a visit to the red suited guy in the local department store, that ultimately he loved you, and that he would be fair to you, and seemed to

overlook all the little things you did that just maybe you shouldn't have done, but couldn't really stop yourself from doing. And although your parents may have teased you about how if you didn't do what they wanted you to do, lumps of coals would appear or there would be a lack of presents; you still didn't get too worried because you knew, that your parents loved you. And plus, overall, past Christmas' seem to work out pretty darn good. So, to be honest, I'm guessing for most children, we kind of saw through the foreboding, stalking and eavesdropping threats, and the law enforcer part of the season, and were more focused on the potential arrival of all that loot on that great morning.

Perhaps as we hear the Gospel text this morning, maybe a similar viewpoint could apply. We know that the coming of Jesus again, the Advent of Christ, can mean a reckoning of this world; but we also know what his first coming in the manger, has already accomplished for us. This is why we can encounter a passage like this one from Luke with a particular viewpoint of hope and not fear. This doesn't mean that our behaviors do not matter, quite the contrary. It doesn't mean God doesn't care what we do, because it absolutely impacts this world. It does, however, remind us of the bigger picture, of the empty tomb, of the promised forgiveness of sin and life everlasting. It is with this vantage point that we can view these texts and thus the world differently.

For we are called to expect this coming, the coming of Jesus with the same energy, and the same dedication, and indeed the same joy, as we awaited Kris Kringle when we were but children. It is with the same joy because joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit of God in us -- and because sometimes too many well-meaning Christian voices want to take the joy out

of Advent - the time of preparing for the return of our king and turn it into fear mongering.

The gospel of the second coming is about good news - not bad, it's about the gifts of God for our world. We are called to prepare ourselves for the gift of God to us of a Savior, who will do what is right and just in the universe, of a Messiah who saves the world, not destroys it. We remember that God loves us, and like our most of our parents who are loving, in the end God will not put coal in our stockings because we have forgotten to pick up our socks, or left our toys on the living room floor, or have disappointed and wronged others, and even at times forsaken God. Instead we know of a God who gives sight to the blind, makes the lame walk, the deaf to hear, mute to speak, and a heavy stone rolled away.

And the best way to prepare for that type of God promise and God entrance, and this is what Advent is all about, is by preparing, inviting, helping, sharing, and hoping; not by developing fear of what will happen if we are not prepared, but rather by developing ways of giving hope, making peace, expressing love and sharing joy; not on ways that limit, judge or reject others or push people to the margins, but instead seeking to embrace all that God has created, all humans that God calls good.

So we are on on guard so that our hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life, but instead with the promises of the Gospel. We watch with anticipation, we watch with hope. Amen.