

## Advent 1C. Luke 21:25-36. November 29, 2015.

Advent 1 always starts with a bang. We come in sleepy and satisfied, expecting perhaps a baby shower for the coming baby Jesus. He is coming, and it will be adorable. This is what we expect and instead we get the end of the world. We can't blame Luke for this—the same thing happens on the first Sunday of Advent every year. It jars us, it dislocates us, knocks us of our balance. For some of us, it is an immediate and unwelcome replay of Thanksgiving dinner. It is disorienting, and this is on purpose. Because Advent has to shake us up, make us a little uncomfortable, put us on our guard.

Let me illustrate the easy, wrong, and all too common approach to Advent with a ridiculous true story. In college, I dated a girl whose family was from Tennessee and were, therefore, Tennessee Volunteers football fans. This family had what was, to me, the strangest Thanksgiving tradition. Every year they'd eat lunch and enjoy each others' company and generally be normal. And then while the womenfolk cleaned up (this was in the South, remember), the men would retreat to the living room and put in a VHS tape of the 1991 University of Tennessee vs. Notre Dame football game. And then they'd watch the game in its entirety. Every year.

Now granted, this was an exciting game. Tennessee fell behind 31-7 in the first half, only to come back [spoiler alert] to win 35-34, with Notre Dame missing a pretty short field goal as time expired. The guys in this family watched this game every Thanksgiving and competed to see who could make the best variant of the following joke: "I just don't think they're gonna pull this one out. They should bench that quarterback (who would go on to be the hero). Oh, this kicker is so good, I just don't think there's any chance he'll miss this last second field goal." They mock disbelieved that anything so wonderful as a full comeback victory could be possible all the way through the game.

And then Notre Dame would line up to try a last second field goal to win the game and the guys would lean forward and I think the anticipation at this point was even a little bit real. And the kick goes wide-right and the guys all jump off the couches and shout and holler and celebrate as if it were still 1991. They celebrate the memory with gusto and even a touch of authenticity. And I think that this ritual actually has a lot in common with the way of observing Advent that we are always in danger of falling into.

We know that in Advent we are called to wait and watch—but we are always in danger of waiting and watching only for a memory, for the holiday of Christmas, when we remember that Jesus *came*. Advent 1 shocks us with apocalypse to get us to remember that Jesus is also *coming*. The point of the first Sunday of Advent is that we are not just waiting for a memory: the waiting, the hope of Advent is alive and, surprisingly, future-oriented. The message today is that God is coming, bringing justice, peace, love, and hope. This is a much gutsier, riskier claim, and it might make us feel many things, but comfortable certainly isn't one of them.

Luke's apocalypse this morning may make us grimace a little for fear that we might be associated with Left Behind and the preachers who produce wall-sized charts detailing and predicting the last days. Perhaps some of you have heard of the famous, now infamous, book 88 Reasons Why Jesus is Coming Back in 1988. But the thing is, these kinds of stories are actually pretty relevant. Chaos among the nations, natural disasters, people overcome with fear, the powerful being shaken. I said this passage was

describing the end of the world, but of course it could also be describing last week or last year or last decade. I don't mean "the world is ending, repent, get in your fallout shelter, and wait for Jesus to appear on a white horse with a sword." Every generation thinks that they're the last ones. I mean that the world is always ending somehow, for some folks, and God is always coming.

This little apocalypse from Luke isn't most valuable as a prediction. It is most valuable to tell us how to conduct ourselves in times like now, when things are dire, when the world might be ending or might just have a really nasty cough. In those times, when maniacs are in charge and the good are always vulnerable, Luke's Jesus tells us to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.

Again, I'm not saying that the world is actually about to end, that Armageddon is due on Wednesday. I'm saying two things: when things are dire, God is coming. And the Christian response to the worst is to hold our heads up and conduct ourselves as if our redemption is drawing near.

That redemption might look a little different for different ones of us. But Luke gives us a couple traits that we'll share as we live in anticipation of being saved: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." I read this as a description of two types of despair for the Christian to avoid. The first, dissipation and drunkenness, is the despair that leads to hedonism. "The world is going to hell anyway, so let us eat, drink, and be merry." It's tempting, but it is not the behavior of a people whose redemption is drawing near.

And the second, being weighed down with the worries of this life, is the despair of the person who can never stop worrying about all the ills of the world, who is obsessed with fixing everything him or herself—it is the despair of the perfectionist in an imperfect world. It is, finally, the despair of a person who cannot trust her comrades or her God to play their role in redemption. There is too much work to do for God's people to fall into either of these kinds of despair. Too much for there to be room for dissipation, and too much for us to think that we can do it on our own.

So we are to live as if our redemption were drawing near, and we know this means avoiding hedonistic and obsessive self-reliant despair. But that leaves a pretty good bit of life uncovered. So, what are we to do? Well, here is the wisdom of Advent: we don't know, and so we watch and wait. Who could have predicted that God would come to us in a remote corner of the world, to an unwed mother, in a manger? What will our redemption look like when it draws near? We don't know. But if Christmas is any guide, it will be surprising, costly, vulnerable, beautiful, and will ask a lot of us.

So stand up and raise your heads! God is coming like the summer, opening the leaves of the fig tree. God is coming like a baby, crying out for our love. God is coming with redemption in hand. God is coming into our tumultuous or boring lives in ways we cannot even imagine. Amen.