

Advent 1 C, November 29, 2009
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: Luke 21:25-36

From Fear to Faith

Have you been shaking your head more lately, wondering what the world is coming to? And I'm not talking about the crowds and prices of Black Friday. Newscasts and broadcasts daily describe the crises and convolutions that cause havoc and harm in countless places on this globe and disrupt the dreams of social planners and the best laid schemes to heal a sick society. When these things begin to happen—these grim things like war and hatred, pestilence and famine, violence and vengeance, hearts will fail with fear for what is happening on the earth and from the depths cry out, "What can we do?" Yet some hearts look up and other heads are raised to see what God is doing and to know that victory, His victory, is just around the corner. The one is fear, the other faith.

Some see "The End" as a thermonuclear destruction, a giant meltdown, a mega deep freeze—all with the human race choking to death on the fumes of progress. Others see "The End" as the coming of the Son of Man with power and great glory, bringing our redemption. The one is fear, the other faith.

So suddenly it's Advent, even in the final sense when He who came and He who comes will come again. What are we to make of all this—we with out alternating practice of belief and unbelief, obedience and disobedience, fear and faith? We can tolerate the festival for which we have some 25 shopping days left, we can tolerate that as long as we can make the festival over in

our image and get rid of Him again when He disturbs us. We really like the theme of love that Jesus brings to us as He comes in Word and Sacrament. But what do we do with this phrase that we confess **“And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end”**? What do we do with Christ’s word that this world we know today will end?

Is there anything in this prophetic word of Christ to call us from fear to faith? Well, if our faith is merely in the future, in some unknown day ahead when everything will be all right, and when the promises for better things ahead are all fulfilled, and when peace finally settles over this earth, well, then, there is little in this word that will support that kind of faith. As Jesus spoke this prophecy, He did not give much encouragement to those who envision great things for the human race. Nor does Jesus have any hope for those who invested in a long parade of idols as panaceas for our ills, the latest fads offered to free us from our hang-ups. Nor does our Lord support thinking that identifies the kingdom of God with ecclesiastic successes and acceptance by the general population as a troupe they’re glad to have aboard.

In fact, there is much that can be frightening in this text: **“...on the earth distress of nations in perplexity...people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world...the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”** It is frightening that all of these demonic powers stalk the earth, wreaking their havoc in the horrors of our inhumanity, our wars, our crimes against each other, our addictions, as we each exalt ourselves as god. When these things begin to happen—these desperate, distressing, and despairing things, and when you and I find ourselves with nerves upset, our spirits standing on the brink of desolation, when everything goes wrong and all of our foundations crumble, when every light goes out and we are sitting in the

dark, when all our clichés of piety explode and hit us in the face—what do we do then? Do we abandon hope? Do we forsake the faith? Do we surrender to our fear? Do we shake our clenched fist at God?

You see, Jesus isn't threatening us with possibilities of what might be unless we come up soon with some ingenious scheme that will enable us to wheel and deal our way *around* the tribulation. No, Jesus is simply being realistic, telling us not what *might* be but rather what *will* be; but then He add this word: **“But watch...that you may have strength to escape all these thing that are going to happen.”** And that's the key that turns this text from fear to faith. The Son of Man comes in a cloud with power and great glory. The word might be “Look out!”—if as in the days of Noah we are at our usual business blissfully unmindful of the storms that gather and threaten judgment. But for the child of faith the word is not “Look out!” but, “Look up!”—not to warn us to duck our heads. It's Jesus' call from fear to faith, telling us stand up tall, to draw another breath, to hope again, for **“your redemption is drawing near.”**

Jesus then tells a story that fits, even with a mild fall that we have had. The leaves have fallen, and the trees await the ice and snow of winter. It doesn't take much snow for us to have our fill of it. But when the trees begin to bud and leaf again you know that summer is at hand. And when you see these things begin to happen, you know that the kingdom of God is at hand. Your redemption is drawing near. The Son of Man is on the throne and great power.

Who is this Son of Man who is coming? He is the Son of God who came, Jesus Christ who took on our flesh and bone, blood and nerves. When Jesus tells that when these things begin to happen, then look up, Jesus is not just whistling in the dark, for He has been through tribulation

Himself—at Gethsemane and Calvary. Jesus accomplished our redemption, atoned for our all our guilt, purchased our forgiveness, crushed the juggernaut of death, and brought life and immortality to light. He is the Son of Man in whom we have been brought from death to life, in whom we know the joy of guilt removed and sin forgiven, who has given us already our down-payment on the fullness of redemption.

The Son of Man has never lost control; He never will. He wants us to know *that fact* as He calls us from fear to faith, as He sketches outlines of the tribulation and the judgment yet to come, *and* the mercies, too. The time will be, and already is, when everything will speak against the faith, when all the evidence will scream at us, “So where is your God now?” The time will come, in fact already is, when fear will grip people at their throats to choke off any ideas about a God who steers the course of history to its goal.

But faith answers: “Where is my God? He is today right where He was when Jesus took His cross, when His apostles went to death for Him and He said nothing, when the martyrs joined their voices in a hymn of praise before the Emperor and his bloodthirsty, jeering throngs as lions roared, and God kept silent. He is there where He will be when you and I come home—right at our side.” So when these things begin to happen, then look up, lift up your heads, for your redemption is at hand. That means the kingdom and the power and the glory breaking through in the victory of Christ!

From fear to faith, and that’s the faith, the certainty that at the end though heaven and earth will pass away, our Lord will never. Where else can we find our refuge but in Him who is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of His creation, the beginning and the end of His own *new* creation. Where else can we hang our hope if not on Him who alone has mercy that endures

forever? Where else is there escape from all these things that will take place if heaven and earth must pass away and only He remain? Who else can take and claim the top priority in life today?

When all these things begin to happen, *look around!*? The scene is hopeless, isn't it, and all the siren songs that promise paradise on earth have gone off key and into ugly discord. When all these things begin to happen, *look within you!*? That scene is even more distressing. All self-trust is shattered. We can't even organize our private kingdom, let alone the kingdom of our God.

When all these things begin to happen, then *look out!*? That's useless too, for we cannot maneuver out of the way, not even by adjusting life to get back on the side of God again. No, when these things begin to happen, then *look up*, lift up your heads, for your redemption is near.

“These things” are not the reason to give in and let the world go on its merry way to self-destruction while we idle time away. “These things” are not the reason to give up and cry, “I’m beaten,” and surrender to the world with all its passions and distractions. “These things” are the reason to give out—to give out with all that we are and all that we have of what the grace of God has made of us and given us. It all the reason to speak the joy we know in Him who is the Lord of all—to call the world from fear to faith. And don't you think, in view of all these things, it's time for that this Advent?

Grateful for the help of Alton Wedel with this sermon.

Henry V. Gerike