

Luke 21: 25-36

First Sunday of Advent, Year C

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I know some folks who have been planning on the Second Coming, planning in a real, concrete way. They have put no investment in the future, at least not in this world; their first thought upon waking is "It could happen today." *It* being the return of Jesus with power and great glory, maybe even in a cloud. And I will tell you that I have been uncharitable toward this family, rolled my eyes, and worse. They're not alone, of course, I'm reminded that everyone has always thought they're living in the end times - and so far, we've all been wrong.

But two saints have recently reshaped my thoughts about the return of Christ: Bernard of Clairvaux and Buddy (of) Stallings. Bernard of Clairvaux you may know less about than Buddy, Bernard lived in the twelfth century, an abbot and a spiritual sage. He wrote about the three arrivals of Christ, three advents. The first was the arrival of Jesus as testified by the gospels, the baby born in the little town of Bethlehem. You and I missed that first advent by about two millennia, but we know the story like the back of our hands. We tell and retell the story from those first accounts each year gathering around the manger with Mary, Joseph, magi, and shepherds to see Jesus come into the world. The second advent, according to Bernard, is also written about extensively - though it hasn't happened yet. This is the Second Coming of the Book of Revelation, of Yeats, and of my prepper friend, convinced of the final end. But Bernard of Clairvaux sneaks a third advent between these two well-known stories. This he calls a "middle Advent." And it's the one Buddy described in this pulpit a few weeks ago. "The present moment is indeed the occasion of God in our lives, for it is in these moments that the [coming of Christ] occurs again and again all around us." Bernard and Buddy, both saints, are telling us that Jesus is coming back and that not only could it happen today, but it does happen today and every day. We are living in the middle advent of Christ.

"Jesus said, 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations ... people will faint from fear and foreboding.'" Two thousand years ago, those words accurately described the tenor of their world, and they still seem fresh and resonant today. That's because these external sources of chaos have actually always been part of the deal. Anne Dillard wrote, "Why are we keeping up with the news? Only to enforce our fancy - probably a necessary lie - that these are crucial times, and we are in on them. Newly revealed, and we are in the know: crazy people, bunches of them. New diseases, shifts in power, floods! Can the news from dynastic Egypt have been any different?" People have been looking around at the dire situation and wondering how long until it all finally falls apart since the very, very beginning. This is how it is. We're not so special and precious.

And yet we are so special and precious that Christ keeps showing up again and again, all around us. Even here in the shadows of despair and sorrow, of anger and dread. Every messy, chaotic day is an occasion for God. Didn't you catch that bit? "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Now. Redemption, grace, restoration, freedom - whatever you may call it, this goodness comes not in spite of the shaking world but just so, into our everyday trembling lives. Because there's always a commotion, see, the commotion has always been the occasion for God in our lives.

Playwright Tennessee Williams said in the middle of the last century, "The world is violent and mercurial - it will have its way with you. We are saved only by love ... We live in a perpetually burning building, and what we must save from it, all the time, is love."

It's almost too easy to catalog the burning buildings: climate catastrophes, mistrust and disinformation, wars and rumors of wars, the tumult of politics, the turmoil of our own lives with our lesser-known battles to fight. The "signs" of disarray and confusion are so obvious that we don't have to work hard at all to see them; in fact, we have to work much harder to limit the input of bad news. It's no challenge at all to tally the signs of distress, it's almost impossible to tune out the roar of vitriol.

What Jesus calls us to search for is the more difficult hunt: not the signs of the end, but the signs of redemption, the signals that the Kingdom of God is nearer than anyone imagined or expected. Stand up and raise your heads, look around, pay attention to the strange and redeeming events afoot. Look for the green shoots and sprouting leaves. This is the lesson of the middle Advent: that we not prepare for the end but train ourselves to expect love and mercy, forgiveness and freedom growing up amid the tangle of weeds, right in the middle of it all. Because this is how it always is, this is where Christ shows up - always.

Perhaps when Jesus suggests that we ought to "be on guard" and "be alert," it is not an encouragement to live in fear or battle-ready, but to turn off the alerts of the 24/7 news cycle, to escape the delusion, the lie, that the chaos is what matters. It's an invitation to shake off the clamor because so much of the clamor is just a means of distraction. Elsewhere in Luke, he says, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit." "Be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks" To be alert for moments of redemption, to open the door for reconciliation, to light our lamps to help us look for love, for the green bud of hope. Instead of assuming the worst outcome, that the end is near, we are looking, watchful, attentive to the signs of possibility and of hope. Instead of dreading the dire outlook, we are encouraged to see the signs of the kingdom arriving daily.

Here, even here. Today.

So, I'm going to stop saying those preppers are wrong. I mean, I'm still not convinced that Jesus is coming in a cloud - unless it's in the simple beauty of the pink and orange clouds as the sun sets on a winter evening. I don't think that they're looking for the same thing I'm looking for, mostly because I'm still looking around this very world. But they're right that kingdom is near. The story of Christ coming into the world again is true. What the arrival of Christ looks like for you and for me may not be obvious or expected. That's why we have to stand up and raise our heads, to look out past the muddle. Since the beginning we have always been so easily distracted by the mayhem, and since the beginning Love calls us to look for love, our Redeemer tells us to look for redemption, Jesus tells us to be alert because God is here, already, always here in the middle of it all.