

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hearing today's Gospel may have taken you by surprise and given you a bit of a jolt. You come to church today, and you hear some startling words:

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars ... People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

So, the scripture continues, "Be on guard," lest "that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap." Anticipating buying Christmas presents, you may be wondering if your January credit card statements might catch you unexpectedly, but this scripture sounds even a good deal more serious than that.

So what kind of scripture reading is this, just when perhaps we're beginning to feel a lot like Christmas? It's a scripture for Advent, that's what it is.

But it has been a year since we last celebrated Advent, so let me remind you of what Advent means. Advent is the season in our church calendar that includes the four Sundays before Christmas.

The word itself, *advent*, means "a coming." But in truth, it means two comings, because Advent reminds us of both Jesus' first coming, to Bethlehem, over two thousand years ago, and his second coming, which we still await, when Christ will come in glory and judgment.

The traditional mood of this season, in the church calendar, is a mood of repentance, as we prepare ourselves for both the celebration of Christmas, and the eventual return of our Lord.

I think that it ought also to be a mood of great joy – joy that God sent his Son into the world two millennia ago, for our salvation, and that God still has plans for us and for this world to this very day.

The first time Jesus came, it seems that not many people were really looking for him. Probably every loyal Jew in those days expected that someday God would send the Messiah, and the literature of that period indicates that a great many people, both Jews and Gentiles, were longing for some special intervention by God, but only a few were really looking.

After all, how many people came to see Jesus at his birth, or soon thereafter? The shepherds came, but as far as we know, they weren't looking. Instead, an angel came looking for them. One might say that they came to the manger purely by grace, just because God sought them out.

The wise men came – and they were looking. Their story is one of the miracles of all time, that some men from a generally pagan background were led to the newborn King.

And there were Simeon and Anna: they were definitely looking. The Gospel of Luke indicates that they had been waiting for years for the coming of the Messiah.

I wonder: If I had been living when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, would I have gotten in on the occasion? Would I have been like those few who were so intent on finding Jesus that they did indeed locate him? Perhaps the answer can only be found in the earnestness with which I wait for him now, in my own time.

When Jesus came to Bethlehem, he didn't then finish the salvation story. His birth was only the beginning. Mind you, it was a powerful beginning, so powerful that our western world renumbered the calendar around Jesus' birth, so that we speak of B.C. and A.D. – or more recently, of BCE and CE, but with the same tacit testimony, that Jesus cut history into two by his coming.

But the job wasn't finished at Bethlehem, and not even on the cross. Yes, in Christ's first coming power was let loose in the world to transform both our lives and our world, but the salvation story wasn't then finished.

You want proof?

During this season we will send and receive any number of Christmas cards hailing Jesus as “the Prince of Peace,” and carrying a message about “peace on earth,” but ours is far from a peaceful planet.

And Jesus came to save the world from sin, but I don't have to tell you that sin is still an active force in our world. No, the job isn't done yet. And this is why Jesus announced, as he left his disciples, that he would come again.

And this is why the Apostle Paul and some of the disciples of Jesus said that he would return some day. And this is why, in this Advent season, we not only seek to prepare ourselves for a true celebration of Christ's birth, we also remind ourselves that God isn't done with us, or our world, just yet. Jesus will come again.

But this is such a difficult subject that many pastors hesitate to preach about it. Jesus Himself said that no one knows the day or the hour when he will appear. He said that not even the angels of heaven know the time.

And if the second coming is going to be a surprise to the angels, it seems pretty audacious for me or any other pastor to begin setting dates. And yet, Jesus has given us some guidelines. In our Gospel, Jesus says there will be “signs in the sun, the moon and the stars.”

Is this a helpful statement? We know that all through history people have seen signs in the heavens.

Jesus said that people “will faint from fear” of what is coming upon the world. In truth, we’ve had many times in history when people’s hearts have failed them for fear.

Sometimes, the fears have been so great as to cause dramatic increases in suicides and in drug usage. How do we know that the fears, or the signs in the heavens, are the specific crucial ones that signal Jesus’ final return?

To be honest with you, I don’t think we can draw any specific conclusions from these signs. It’s possible, of course, that we’ve never yet seen anything like the signs Jesus had in mind.

Even though there have been hundreds of times when people have seen signs in the sun, moon and stars, and hundreds of times when peoples’ hearts have failed them for fear, perhaps Jesus was speaking about an instance of these kinds beyond anything our world has ever known.

Still, we have the warning. Be on your guard, Jesus said, so your hearts are not “weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life,” so that the big day would catch us unawares. To put it in language that fits the season, be sure you don’t miss Christ’s coming!

But I’m struck by the special language Jesus uses here.

He warns against “dissipation and drunkenness,” which are particular hazards to one kind of person, and yet he also warns against being caught by “the worries of this life,” which are often hazards to a very different kind of person.

I think we all understand the meaning of “drunkenness,” but this *dissipation* may require some definition. When life is going well, we may become “extravagant in the pursuit of pleasure” – that’s dissipation. It means wasting away life in intemperate, uncontrolled living.

On the other hand, when life is not going so well, we can become anxious and fretful, consumed by the “worries of this life.” Jesus says, “Don’t do that, either.” In essence, Jesus is saying that every one of us is in danger of being caught off guard.

“Be alert at all times,” says Jesus, “praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” Be alert! I think Jesus is saying that it’s easy to become complacent and inattentive, and that the only “secret” is to keep on the alert.

If the times are good and prosperous, be alert; such times may tempt you to dissipation and drunkenness. If the times are filled horrors and tragedies, with ominous headlines, keep alert, because at such times we can be destroyed by the worries of this life.

At the beginning of this Advent season, I'm sounding an "Advent Alert." You may think I'm a killjoy in doing this, but in truth, it's just the opposite. I'm the Good News person, proclaiming, "Christ is coming! Don't miss him!"

Only this time, the coming of our Lord of which I speak is even more climactic than when he came two thousand years ago. This is "the Big One," when Christ comes to finish what he began in his first coming.

No, I don't have all the details, and I would suggest that you seriously doubt anyone who says he does. And I can't tell you how close, or how far away it is; the angels don't know, so how would I? But this I do know. I certainly don't want to miss it.

If I had been around two thousand years ago, I wouldn't have wanted to have missed Jesus then. And now, just in case, I don't want to miss the second time our Lord comes. But the key to not missing out is very simple. It's not easy, but it's very simple. Keep alert. Live as if Christ once came – because He did; live as if Christ will come again – because He will. Keep alert. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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