

Today begins the season of Advent. Advent is the season of 4 weeks when we prepare for Christmas and the birth of Jesus, the Christ child. You will already have noticed that we have decorated the sanctuary for Advent.

We have special banners along the walls, we have wreaths on the doors and windows, we have candles in the windows, we have a tree in the front of the sanctuary. This tree has begun to be decorated with Christmas ornaments which are symbols for Jesus.

The Scriptures which we will be reading during these 4 weeks are all chosen to help prepare us to understand what the birth of the Christ child is all about for us. As we begin to read this upcoming gospel lesson this morning, however, you may be confused as to why we are reading this type of passage.

That is because this passage we will be reading is not a passage leading up to the birth of Jesus. Instead, this is a passage at the end of the gospel when Jesus is talking about the end times and what our approach should be toward the future.

We are reading lectionary passages today which are Scriptures assigned to each Sunday of the year. The first Sunday of Advent scriptures usually connect the birth of Jesus to the future predictions of the world. That will be the case today.

The scripture we will be reading will mention the coming of the "Son of Man." This is an odd term that Jesus uses to describe himself in the future. This is a term which has its roots in the Old Testament prophecies of Daniel and Ezekiel. It's a term that Jesus uses that some say affirms his humanity while others say it affirms his divinity.

As we read this passage pay attention to the contrasts between fear and hope. Where is the fear and where is the hope?

Read Luke 21:25-36 (Letarshia)

This week I had lunch with a pastor friend of mine after a meeting we had together in Columbia. My friend pastors a church that was once a fast-growing church in a dynamic area of Columbia. As a child growing up around Columbia, I remember this particular area being the center of activity and commerce. It was THE place to shop and live.

But that is not how the area would be described now. The parking lot of the mall behind the church was vacant as we drove through it toward our lunch destination. It was vacant because the mall barely has any tenants now.

The area around the church would be described by many as depressed. The church where my friend has been pastor for 2 years was once a fast-growing church but now the membership is small compared to what it once was. The ones who gather in worship on Sunday are dwarfed by their large sanctuary.

At lunch my friend confessed to me that he was struggling. Struggling because the elder nominating committee can't get people to agree to serve on Session. Struggling because their church contributions were decreasing while their membership was getting older. His kid was one of only 2 elementary kids in the church. My friend was feeling a sense of despair at the future of that church.

In the text that we have read today we see signs of dread and fear about the future. Jesus talks about distress among the nations that are confused by what is happening around them.

Jesus says that people will faint from fear at what they will see happening. Jesus says that even the powers in heaven will be shaken. These are indeed descriptions which create a sense of dread and fear of the future.

Do we come into worship today with a sense of fear about the future? Fear as we see wars and threats of war? Fear as we see destruction of the planet entrusted to our care? Fear as we encounter harmful and hurtful words directed our way? Fear as we see institutions that we cherish falling apart?

If we live in fear, then how are we acting? If we are fearful of the future, then we are less willing to take necessary risks. If we are fearful of the future, then we lack imagination to finding solutions to problems that plague us.

If we are fearful of the future, we will give into despair. If we are fearful of the future, then we will allow those who wield unhealthy power to dominate us.

But Jesus in this text does not see events in the future as events to be feared. Quite the opposite. Jesus says that when you see signs of despair and fear that you should raise your head. Raise your head as a sign of hope. Raise your head if you can see past destruction and intimidation and see that through Jesus Christ God is making all things new.

Raise your head if you believe that the many dangerous acts and opinions that surround us will not stand the test of time. Raise your head if you believe that the true Word of God through Jesus Christ will stand forever.

Jesus says that our fears can lead us into destructive places like drunkenness and despair and worry. Jesus says to watch out for this trap. Jesus says to instead to be alert and to pray for strength and stand with the Son of Man.

Many people read these types of passages and then read book series like the *Left Behind* series and think that this is all about end times with dramatic signs of people departing the earth in apocalyptic ways. I don't go there. What I read in this passage is guidance about how we are to live our lives today.

If we live in fear of the future, then we will be trapped into destructive behavior. But if we live in hope that the Word of God through Jesus conquers all fear then we will live our lives as people of hope. And what does that look like?

I want to share a story that I think gives an example of looking at one situation from despair and of looking at the same situation as a sign of hope.

Blogger Janet Hunt tells about a funeral she attended last week. She says this:

On Tuesday this week we gathered for the funeral of Matt who was but 41 years old. Born with several chronic health challenges, Matt would not ever have the future his parents imagined for him when he was born into the world. Matt's life would be described as tragic. But his parents, in the face of this heartache, chose to always remain hopeful.

They kept seeking out doctors — looking always for those doctors who would believe along with them. They traveled the country with their son, ensuring that his world would be bigger than it otherwise might have been.

Because of his dad's work as a firefighter, Matt was given a connection to a world of heroes who made him their own. On Tuesday afternoon before the funeral began, more than fifty firefighters from all over the county stood in line and processed to his casket and one after another saluted Matt's body.

And oh, there was not a dry eye in the room as we saw this amazing reversal of how the world measures things. That one after another in their dress blues and in their work clothes, they stepped away from work — some of them literally running in at the last minute to join the procession — to honor one who the world would too often ignore.

And in that moment, I found myself wondering at this — that if I, if we, had not simply stood up and raised our heads we might have missed this altogether: this living witness to a promised world where the lowly will all be lifted up in Christ's return.

In the words of today's Gospel, we are invited to set aside our discouragement, our fear, our anger, our hatred born of self-righteousness, and to stand up and to raise our heads.

To raise our heads against the elements of fear and intimidation in this world. And to instead raise our heads to be followers and believers in Jesus Christ who is the best sign of hope that God has ever given to us. AMEN.

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-Hunt, Janet, <http://dancingwiththeword.com/stand-up/>

-Given: December 2, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)