

WELCOME 27th November 2022 – 1st Sunday in Advent '22 A

Luke 21:25-36

Welcome! It's great to be together again today! **Bible Study Qs** are there to equip you so God can lead you deeper into His word/work in your life, & so you can share that w/ someone else. We also use them for our **Zoom Bible Study Catch-ups** on Friday @ 1p.m. Which will resume Friday 9th December!

As we move into this week... **Are** you ready for Christmas?

No matter how much you prepare...it always seems to arrive before you're really ready...especially if there's small children or travel involved. And then...no sooner is it here, than it is over...another year...another page torn off the calendar. More bills to pay more stuff to clean up, give away or throw away or return...

But what if we could **REALLY LIVE** like Christmas was more than a day...more than a season of silly...more than food & family & money spent faster than it's earned? What if we could **REALLY LIVE** like Christmas was a **PERSON** who is here now & every day? Whose presence & power are ours in every season...silly sad or sensational? Who never leaves & never lets go of our lives?

What if we lived seeing the signs of Christ's presence? What if behind the troubling sights of our world we could see his greater work of restoring & redeeming all creation to the Father? What if we could see Christ at work in us...granting love & assurance, joy & peace, strength & hope in our hearts & lives every...single...day? **So** when all these things begin to happen, stand & look up, for your salvation is near!

This year God wants to give so much more than a temporary fix to the deep longings in our hearts. God actually longs to have us whole & healed, at peace & content, living out joy & hope following him as he shows us his way into each day. We'll experience that together today...and we'll watch for him as we worship & light the 1st candle on the Advent Wreath.

Let's pray...

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Martin Luther)

Lord Jesus look upon us, empty vessels that needs to be filled. In faith we are weak—strengthen us. In love we are cold—set us alight so that your love may go out through us to our neighbour. We doubt and are unable to trust you fully. Lord, strengthen our trust in you. You are all the treasure we possess. We are poor, you are rich, and you came to have mercy on the poor. We are sinners, you are goodness. From you we receive goodness, justice & righteousness, but we can give you nothing in return. Therefore we shall stay with you & delight in you in the hope that you will use us for your glory.

Someone light the Advent Wreath

*O come, O come, Immanuel
And bless each place your people dwell.
Melt ev'ry weapon crafted for war,
Bring peace upon the earth forever more.
Rejoice, rejoice! Take heart and do not fear,
God's chosen one, Immanuel, draws near.*

Let it be in us according to your eternal promise in Jesus... Amen.

Let's hear God's word...

1st Sunday in Advent '22 A – EXPERIENCE CHRISTMAS: SEE THE SIGNS

The old Christmas song starts, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year...” Is it? Or do you, like so many around us, reach these days leading to Christmas with a high degree of anxiety, worry, & even sadness...? Maybe this year seems doubly so...more so even than during the worst of the pandemic...Then at least we had a focus for our feelings & fretting...But I’m going to propose at least what I believe is the reason...you’ve likely heard me say it before...But I contend the greatest contributor to our anxiety, worry sadness unsettledness is not war, or economic insecurity, or crime & community unrest, or racial injustice, or social political division...4th 5th or 15th virus wave...all of those play a role...but I would argue that the greatest challenge we face both inside & outside the church...is **fear**.

Why? Because fear is the root of all these other things I just mentioned. Think about it. From Pharaoh in the first chapter of Exodus to today’s tyrants & neighbourhood back streets, fear is the means by which we turn those who are in some fashion different from us into an enemy. Fear causes us to accumulate, thinking we’ll never have enough. Fear means we see those around us as competitors for scarce resources. Fear drives wedges of distrust into our communities that fracture unity & compassion. Fear causes us to define ourselves & those around us not by what we share but by what makes us different or the harm we can do to each other. Fear creates an “either/or” “us/them” mentality that makes it nearly impossible to find common ground, let alone see each other sympathetically. Fear, in short, drives us inward, hardens our hearts, darkens our vision, creates barriers & stunts our imagination.

Why else is the most common command & promise in Scripture, “**Do not fear**”? Hundreds of times across the biblical narrative, we find angel, priest, prophet or absolutely ordinary person saying, usually on behalf of God, “*Do not fear!*”

Which is perhaps why...I find Jesus’ promise embedded in the midst of what seems some pretty scary unsettling stuff so reassuring: “**So when all these things begin to happen, stand & look up, for your salvation is near!**” It’s a promise that is easy to miss, because “*these things*” refers to foreboding signs in the earth & heavens, distress & tumult among people, the powers of the day being shaken, & the coming of the “son of man” in power & glory. And yet Jesus tells his disciples to “stand up & raise your heads...look up.” Why? Not, I think, because this is code language or a secret sign that the end of the world is coming & so eternal victory for the faithful is just around the corner & they’ll get to dance on the skulls of their enemies. Rather, it is because, even though **“heaven & earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.”**

Even though everything you see, know & depend on for this life in this world will fade fail & vanish before your eyes...his word will never be broken...never prove false...never let you down...Someone say it...What words? Which of his words is he talking about? The crazy scary ones, the ones we don’t understand, the ones we do understand but don’t like? What words?

Well...this scene takes place leading into Jesus’ final night with his followers before his arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, burial & resurrection. Let’s start there: “**This is my body, given for you; this is my blood shed for you.**” Jesus promises his on-going real presence with his disciples...continuing to work his life deep into theirs. “**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.**” Jesus promises forgiveness...however far you’ve fallen his hands are there. “**Today you will be with me in paradise.**” Jesus promises that not even death torture agony or betrayal will separate you from him & his promise of eventual ultimate rest & comfort. “**Peace be with you.**” Jesus promises his resurrection puts death to death & the endless cycle of violence & revenge retribution & grievance are over.

“heaven & earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.” Across the board, Jesus promises to not abandon his disciples amid the storms & traumas of the world but to be with them, strengthen & encourage them, & empower them not merely to endure the challenges of the day but to flourish in the middle of them. Jesus’ promises, do not eliminate fear or hardship from the lives of his disciples – then or now – but rather create boldness & courage, patience & faithfulness, hope & joy even when life itself seems pretty shaky.

This promise does not insulate us from an uncertain/ugly future, but it does promise that we will not face that future alone. Come hell or high water – & this seems as appropriate a phrase as any these days – Jesus will be at our side, granting us courage in the face of life’s adversities & remaining with us even through death, drawing us into new life. That promise we can trust because through death into new life he has already gone.

CS Lewis reminds us: “**Most** people, if they really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, & want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise.” Deep in our hearts we long for that sense of wholeness & completeness & rightness that this world simply cannot provide...but boy we chase it...and no time like these days around Christmas do we chase it with all our strength...

Maybe in this season you like so many are strained by spending money you don't have on things nobody needs for people who already have everything. Isn't that Christmas in the West? Maybe in this season it's the loved ones who won't gather around your home that you particularly notice by their absence. Maybe your family will be one of the many that doesn't come together as one & you'll be juggling who gets to spend time with whom, & when... You & I may not be looking an occupying army in the face, like those in Jerusalem in Jesus' day, but maybe it's life-transition decisions, the source of your income, or a new ache pain diagnosis or treatment plan. Whatever it takes to make the "powers" shake in your part of the world.

But into the very worst... which I pray you & I will never experience, God delivers this promise... what you see with your eyes – current circumstances – moment of pain heartache/anguish – complete disaster **IS NOT** God's end game, & until God himself call's time... you keep playing... keep serving keep loving keep giving keep inviting keep sharing your faith keep opening your hearts/hands/fridge/wallets to the people around you - keep using all you have at your disposal to lead 1 more person to the God who promises to forgive & restore & bring life.

Jesus calls us to see the world through a different light & lens----the light of God's presence & the lens of God's promises. You know... I heard something strange about lenses... some bright sparks have developed contact lenses for chickens. You heard right... tinted red & with some built in distortions they make the chickens less restless/less aggressive & therefore cheaper/easier to keep & feed & they lay more eggs & the eating varieties get fatter faster. Go figure... BUT... it got me wondering...

Have we so lost our ability to "see" God's word made manifest that we've become like those chicken... docile, compliant, easily controlled, tame? Have we allowed our imaginations to be shaped/moulded by our dominant culture that sees violence as the primary means of solving the world's problems & political spin as the easy substitute for truth-telling? Have we become so accustomed to being disappointed that we dare not dream? Have we become so accustomed to being rejected that we've stopped sharing the hope we have within us?

What if we **REALLY LIVED** like Christmas was a **PERSON** who is here now... every day? Whose presence & power are ours in every season... silly sad or sensational? Who never leaves & never lets go of our lives? Who stands alongside you to show you his path into the day... to lead your choosing & deciding... to walk with you in the troubled places & dark spaces? What if we could see Christ at work in us... granting love & assurance, joy & peace, strength & hope in our hearts & lives every... single... day?

So when all these things begin to happen... when the clouds gather in your life & the chaos & anxiety & the worries crowd in... when the RBA raises rates & the Russians or the North Koreans launch more missiles... when today's political lies bleed into tomorrow's & the media does all it can to scare the sleep from you... when your family shudders under the weight of all it bears & you're not even sure what to pray for any more... **stand & look up, for your salvation is near!** This year God wants to give so much more than a temporary fix to the deep longings in our hearts. God actually longs to have us whole & healed, at peace & content, living out joy & hope following him as he shows us his way into each day.

TAKE IT HOME -

What's one thing you will do between now & the New Year to look for the work of God hidden in the mess of the world & the normal routines in your ordinary daily activities? and... What do you will you do when you see it?

Share your thoughts with your neighbour...

Let's pray together an old prayer of the church... one of my favourites:

"Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us & your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

and remember the blessing our older brother Paul gave to the Corinthians

"God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord... who will sustain you to the end..."

We'll sing together "Rest my Soul" & receive our offerings.