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1 Advent C: Luke 21:25-31

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Today begins the season of Advent, season of hope and expectation, season of awaiting the promise of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and the promise of Christ's coming at the end of time. When we talk about Christ's second coming or coming at the end of time, we do not mean he's not here now. In fact, Jesus promises to be with us, to come amongst us, to meet us in word and sacrament, in those whom we serve. "I am with you always, even to the end of the age," Jesus promised his disciples, and us. What we mean when we talk about Christ's second coming is really an unmistakable manifestation, an appearing in a way that no one will miss it, an unambiguous, instantly recognizable appearance of Christ in glory. It is this second coming that our lessons today point us toward.

Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. . . . When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near Be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life." Be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life.

My first grade teacher was Mrs. Reidel. She was a wonderful teacher who saw her job as imparting far more wisdom than simply how to read and print neatly and do elementary arithmetic. Mrs. Reidel also taught us life lessons like, sitting up straight, keeping your hands to yourself, and the importance of not looking down at your feet when you walk. "Stop watching your feet. Head up. Look at the world." It makes sense. Keeping the big picture in view, watching where you're going is important, not just for ease of movement, but also as a way of life. Keeping our heads up, looking at the world, eyes on the goal seems like a good way to help you arrive at your destination.

The Advent season cautions us in a similar way, not to become absorbed in the daily worries of life. Not to let the daily worries weigh our heads, our eyes and focus, down to watching our feet, one little patch of sidewalk. Instead, the season of Advent

calls us to keep our eyes focused on the big picture – on the promise of Christ to come again and to bring to fullness the Kingdom of God.

The picture in today's gospel may sound a little strange to us. Jesus describes the scene of the Second Coming, when the Son of Man will come again with power and great glory. It is a scene where the orderliness of creation is coming undone. Everything solid is coming loose. "There will be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars." The forces of chaos conquered by God in creation seem to be stirring to life once again in the "roaring of the sea and the waves." Even "the powers of heaven will be shaken."

When everything solid comes loose, when order starts to unravel, when chaos rears its scary head, what's our common human reaction? Duck and cover. Assume the crash position. Hide. Keep your eyes down and just put one foot in front of the other.

How different is Jesus' instruction: "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Chaos and the undoing of order is, for faithful people, not a cause for fear, but a sign of the nearness of God's kingdom, the closeness of our redemption, the final putting right of all that is wrong in the world.

Jesus' language comes in part from the Old Testament prophets, like Jeremiah, who also hoped for the final consummation of God's plans. Jesus speaks about the end which will make possible a new beginning: a future that is different from the present. A future where there is no more evil, no more wrong, no more hatred, or fear. No more greed or scarcity. No more pain. No more of any of the things that keep God's good creation from being the perfect and whole and life-giving thing God meant it to be. Someday our redemption will be complete. Stand up. Heads up. Look at the world.

Jesus' words are for us who live in this time between his first coming in Bethlehem and his coming again at the end of time. We have no idea when this will happen, but Jesus gives us a way to live in this in-between time.

During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives. On May 19th, 1780, the sky of Hartford darkened ominously and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "the Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no reason for

adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought.” We don’t know when the world will end. But in the meantime, when things get dark and chaos looms, stand up, raise your head, light candles, better yet – be a light in the darkness. Be on guard so that your hearts will not be weighed down by the worries of this life.

Part of Jesus Christ’s mission was to bring the kingdom of God among us. And it is here, now, already, but not yet in its perfect fullness. So Christ empowers us to do his work in the world, to work for the kingdom while we’re still in this world. And sometimes, strangely enough, it’s when we’re facing the threat of chaos, when our lives are threatening to unravel, that we can choose to stand up, look at the world, and make something beautiful for God.

A woman I admire in the Milwaukee area is named Rebecca Neuwirth. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and went through treatment. After her experience in the hospital, she said she couldn’t imagine what children go through. She said, “Many go through worse than I ever did, and it kind of struck a chord in my heart. I thought I really needed to give something back to the community.” She read about something called Project Linus, where people make blankets for children who need comfort and help. She became the Milwaukee area coordinator for the project. In 2003, when the chapter started, they delivered almost 400 blankets to children at Children’s Hospital. By last year, they had expanded to about 1500 blankets to two hospitals and to children whose parents were serving in Iraq. It’s a simple way to serve, and a way to turn service into a concrete way to show hope and love. I think what I like most is it grew out of one woman’s experience of something hard, something that could have brought her low. But instead, she stood up, raised her head, looked at the world to see its pain and its need, and did something to help.

Jesus’ words today are for all of us. In the presence of chaos, when things are breaking loose, stand up and raise your head. Look at the world. And look for your God. Christ who went through chaos and death for us, is present with us now. Look for God’s hand at work in the world.

We get glimpses now, don’t we, of when something breaks loose, something solid breaks open, and we are given a choice: cower in fear, or stand up and raise your heads. Sometimes something has to be broken open in order for new life to break in. When it breaks, it may feel like the most frightening thing in the world. What do we do? Take cover? Or stand up, raise our heads, look at the world?

The Rev. Andrea DeGroot Nesdahl has served as Lutheran Bishop of South Dakota. She told the story of her visit in 1998 to the community of Spencer, which

was devastated by a tornado. Among the many losses, including six lives, was a Lutheran church building which was home to St. Matthew's Lutheran Church. She writes, "the day after the tornado, I walked through the remaining rubble of that community with the pastor of [the church] and several others. It was an unbelievable sight. A grain elevator twisted and fallen, a water tower toppled, vehicles and other heavy items strewn around like toys. Whole buildings just gone. . .

"When we were near the site of the church . . . maybe half a block away, someone called out, "There's the statue, there's Jesus!" Sure enough, there it was – the traditional white statue that stands at the altar of many small churches with arms outstretched in [love]. There it, or He was, a beacon to what had been the site of a . . . congregation's place of worship. The white paint on the state was nearly gone, and someone later said that its arms were broken, but I didn't notice, it was just so remarkable, so moving an fitting to look up from the chaos around us and see Jesus, arms outstretched, welcoming and loving his people. We initially thought he had somehow stood through it all, the wind, the hail, the rain, the total destruction of the building all around him, somehow he had stayed upright.

"We learn however . . . [something more important, more to the point of witnessing to Christ's presence in the midst of any trouble.] Two young girls . . . had come to where the church had been . . . They saw the statue lying in the rubble, and figured that everyone needed to see that Jesus was still there [still present] even in the wreckage] so they stood him up for all to see.

God invites us through this season of Advent to stand up, raise up our heads in hope and anticipation, and trust that Jesus is present with us, for us, in any chaos.

Amen.