

## When the World Falls Apart – Luke 21

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First Sunday of Advent  
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

It is the first Sunday in the season of Advent – which means we bath the sanctuary in blue and set up the Advent wreath and hang the banner of hope. Most years, I am also keenly aware that explaining the end of the world on the first Sunday of Advent to the children of God gathered for worship is anything but an easy task. But this year, with great suffering, my task is far easier. We have endured too much since we last gathered to worship. And our eyes cannot simply close to erase the memories of last Sunday. Many of us saw the nightmare unfold. We watched the vehicle speed by or drive through the parade marchers. Some of the children among us watched parade participants bounce off the vehicle and still others watched children fall under the vehicle. I do not share this to shock you – I share these moments to remind all of us that we can only protect each other from so much – some things just happen, and it doesn't do any of us any good to pretend last Sunday night did not happen. Out of respect for those who died, those who were injured, and to speak honestly to our children when they ask questions – we tell the truth always. When the world falls apart – we bear witness to the collapse – the pain – the fear – and the suffering that is experienced. I could work through all the stories we have heard over the past days. Except there are more stories that are personal and painful in ways I did not imagine. The husband who ran towards the pain and suffering instead of away from the nightmare to make sure that his wife was okay. The little boy who, when ushered into one of the buildings to be protected from the gunshots, shouted, “Don't shoot. Don't shoot.” It is the world we should not live in. It is the world God should not allow God's children to live in. It is the world falling apart in front of our eyes, and still, we are here and so is God. “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the power of the heavens will be shaken.” To me, that is what last Sunday felt like.

We were not at the parade. We were at home. When my phone went off – it was a message from the police department. And the two words that flashed in the message – mass casualty. I had to read it twice. I got dressed and drove down to Main Street. It would take me about five minutes of watching everything take place in order for me fully comprehend what the flashing lights and shouting voices meant. I did not know what else to do so I prayed. I said a prayer for everyone tending the broken bodies on the ground and then I began to kneel by the side of the person closest to me on the ground. An older gentleman who told me his name was Bill, I learned later it was Wilhelm, I knelt and asked and I prayed for him. I moved to the next person and then a third and prayed over them. All of them strapped to backboards waiting for ambulance transfers – because there just were not enough to move all the injured at once. And when I looked up from the last prayer – I realized that my eyes were focusing on police officers farther down the street each standing over someone who was not going home that night. I got up and I went from officer to officer – body to body – asking if any family was still nearby, I could tend to. It is the world falling apart in front of our eyes and still we are here and so is God. It felt like the end of the world last Sunday – truth be told, all week – and then we found ourselves here – in this holy house, on this first Sunday of Advent, gathered together as family and friends and God is here. Just as God has been present all along. That is the promise God makes to us – to be present with us.

Jesus went on to say, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” I wonder, what does Advent mean to you this year? For me, Advent means God is sending a messenger among us. Sometimes that messenger is an angel. Sometimes the messenger is a prophet. Sometimes the messenger is the one who lights a candle to chase away the darkness. God sends a messenger...God lights a candle. God offers us hope. In the Old Testament book of Isaiah, chapter 52, we hear these words...how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who breaks the news that all is well – who promises hope. Feet in the Old Testament were anything but beautiful. Sandals, if one was wealthy, barefoot, if one was not. Wrapped in old bandages if one was a leper. Feet were anything but beautiful. Around here, the feet, are almost entirely covered—at least at this time of year and so we must imagine the beauty of the feet of the messengers that bring good news...that share hope, that tell of eternal life, that praise God and lift us up...we have to believe in the beauty of the feet all around us that light candles for hope, joy, peace, and love. In this place the beautiful feet of messengers seem to be everywhere. Choir members and custodians, confirmands and Sunday School teachers, ushers and musicians, eighty -year-olds and six-month-olds and yes, every now and then, a golden retriever or other four-legged creation of God as well. Each in their own way lighting a candle for hope as a messenger of God in Jesus Christ on this first Sunday of Advent.

Who has been a messenger of God in your life? Who has lit a candle for hope in your life? Let God remind you of the light that shines within you. Let God into the places you keep hidden from everyone else. Let God be the light in your darkness—the messenger with the beautiful feet telling you that all will be well. And after the candlelight has chased away the darkness and the messenger has proclaimed hope, brought good news, announced salvation, and promised you that all is well or at the very least that all will be well...stop for just a moment. In the hustle and bustle of this season... stop for just a moment and imagine who, in your own life, needs to hear the message of hope in the person of Jesus. Who, among your friends and family, needs to have a candle lit in hope this day? Are you the one who is able to light that candle? “All this took place, Matthew continues, to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” God is still with us.

After the events of last Sunday, I sent an email to an author Jan Richardson, someone I read and quote often. I wrote, “Jan, my name is Chris and I live in the city of Waukesha that is all over the news right now. I am a pastor and the volunteer police chaplain. Can you recommend one of your blessings for me to use?” She wrote back almost immediately and offered these words: *“Let us agree for now that we will not say the breaking makes us stronger or that it is better to have this pain than to have done without this love. Let us promise we will not tell ourselves time will heal the wound, when every day our waking opens it anew. Perhaps for now it can be enough to simply marvel at the mystery of how a heart so broken can go on beating, as if it were made for precisely this—as if it knows the only cure for love is more of it, as if it sees the heart’s sole remedy for breaking is to love still, as if it trusts that its own persistent pulse is the rhythm of a blessing we cannot begin to fathom but will save us nonetheless.”* Dear friends, light one candle for hope this day. Let it fill the dark spaces of your life; let it find the cracks in your armor and seep in; let it break into the hidden spaces of your heart and chase away the darkness. Light a candle for hope when the world falls apart. Light a candle for hope when your part of the world feels altogether. Light one candle for hope for yourself this day and then do it for someone else! Amen.