



Sunday, December 1, 2024
Luke 21:25-36 (First Sunday of Advent)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Since mid-July I've been not-so-patiently waiting for a nagging lower leg injury to heal itself. And although it's not a major injury...not yet at least, it's become significant enough that the medical recommendation is to take 6 weeks off from any running or other intense activities to let it rest and give it time to heal.

Well, I've got races ahead on the calendar and anyone who knows me knows that taking 6 weeks off from training is *a lot* to ask. However, it seemed like this injury was worsening so I needed to take it more seriously. I decided to follow the recommendation and shift to an old stand-by that would help my injury heal but also not completely sideline my training. For 6 weeks I would commit to taking a brisk walk. So, 5 days a week at 5am I take a 5-mile walk.

This early morning walk has given me new opportunities to slow down, to pray and listen, and pay closer attention to the world around me. The phrase *peace on earth* has presented itself in beautiful and unexpected ways these past few weeks.

And then about 3 weeks ago while I was out something caught my attention, but not because it was dangerous or scary, but because, well...I guess it was just an odd thing for me to see four days after Halloween.

As I was walking, I came across a house that was already fully decorated for Christmas – twinkling lights, inflatables, and all kinds of decorations that lit up the exterior of this house...at 5am...on November 4th! Now don't get me wrong, I *love* Christmas decorations, *but c'mon, what kind of overachiever has this kind of time and works this hard to show up everyone else with how prepared and ready they are for Christmas... whatever!*

My friends, the Christmas season is officially upon us. Everywhere you go Christmas is in the air. Walk into any store or shopping mall and you'll clearly see signs of Christmas – trees, decorations, and packaging reflecting the season. For the most part I try to resist the pull of Christmas until at least Thanksgiving, but now that we're past it, I'm ready to begin preparing, and I'm thankful for all these signs of Christmas. And I hope you are too. Tis the season, right?

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. And while most of our culture is engaged in a consumer feeding frenzy that moves swiftly from one holiday to the next – from Halloween costumes and trick to treat to Thanksgiving turkeys and pumpkin pies to Christmas trees and Jingle Bells it's almost impossible not to get caught up in all the excitement.

And with all the buzz currently about Christmas, Advent might seem like a pointless afterthought – and yet the message of Advent is an important one. As Christians we get ready for Christmas a little differently. We join other Christians in doing something that's rather old fashioned, something that goes against the grain of our world. Even with all the glitz and glamour of Christmas surrounding us, we aren't beginning the season of Christmas here in worship. Instead, we are beginning the season of Advent.

But the season of Advent demands a very different kind of preparation than all the commercials and online sites seem to recommend. And on this First Sunday of Advent, Luke's Gospel sets a completely different tone for the Christmas season than most of us see on television, our drive to work, or while we're out shopping.

In today's gospel, Jesus' speech from the temple in Jerusalem is full of frightening images, confusing metaphors, and shocking warnings. And as difficult as it is to hear, and as troubling as it may make us feel, if



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we're willing to look deeper, and if we can separate ourselves from the appeal of our traditional Christmas images, then we will discover treasures in today's Gospel that help us focus on the true meaning and purpose of Advent.

In today's gospel Jesus is challenging us, just as he did his original hearers in the Jerusalem temple to look up, pay attention, and be ready. Advent means "coming" or "arrival," and this apocalyptic text from Luke reminds us that Advent involves preparing for two comings – God coming to earth in the infant Jesus whom we await at Christmas, and Christ returning to earth at a time we do not know. With this second Advent, it's not a matter of if, but of when, and Jesus wants us to be ready. We do so, Jesus says, by keeping alert, constantly preparing, and continuing to put our hope in our loving God, who comes to us in Jesus Christ.

"There will be signs," Jesus says. Despite some frightening images, the Advent text from Luke doesn't seek to threaten us with fear and punishment, but rather gifts us hope and expectation. And let's not forget that we get to enter the anticipation of Advent knowing how the story unfolds. God in Christ is coming because God loves us and because God wants to redeem us. And in the midst of this, Jesus calls us to *"stand up and raise [our] heads, because [our] redemption is drawing near."*

We can find hope in apocalyptic writing about a better world that can break forth at any time. Famine, drought, war, and disease still plague our world. And closer to home people struggle with greed, addiction, mental illness, and misplaced priorities. Jesus's call to be alert and constantly praying for God's kingdom to break through into our world is as important a call for us this Advent as it's ever been. Our broken and hurting selves and world need Jesus to come, and we all need to take time this Advent to prepare to receive him.

The good news of Advent is not simply that Christ is coming, but that his coming means we can hope, despite all that is falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world around us. Advent offers us expectation and hope for something new. We all have Advent stories about the day it felt like our world ended because of something that happened to us. Maybe you suffered a break-up or watched yours or the marriage of someone close to you fall apart, maybe it was news that the cancer has returned, or an unexpected mental health diagnosis, maybe it was the loss of a job or a friendship, or failing a test, or being excluded from a group, or being turned down by your college of choice, or maybe it was being treated inhumanely because of the color of your skin, your gender, sexual orientation, or economic status.

"There will be signs," Jesus says. And Jesus' parable of the fig tree teaches us how to read the signs. Just as the leaves on the fig tree offer hope that summer is coming again, so too does God's Word, in Jesus, and promises us new life. The signs are our hope and reassurance that God has not abandoned us, that God notices us; that God cares, comes to, and participates in our life's circumstances.

So be on guard, he reminds us. Be alert. Get ready. But also. Remember that he is with us, that his kingdom is in our midst, right here and right now. We don't have to wait for it, plan for it, prepare for it, or do anything at all, for his kingdom to be here with us. It's here now. So, Welcome to Advent. Thanks be to God. Amen!