

## *Pay Attention!*

Rev. Nancy Willet  
Luke 21: 25-36

Advent 1

FPC Uvalde  
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Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Last Sunday after worship we decorated the church with all the greenery and trees, and it looks beautiful, doesn't it? During the Advent season, we begin a period of expectant waiting for the Christ child to be born.

We're used to hearing the familiar passages that lead up to Christ's birth. The story of the John the Baptist preparing the way in the wilderness for Jesus, the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth and how Elizabeth's baby leapt for joy in her womb upon hearing Mary speak. We look forward to the angel visiting Mary and announcing to her that she is with child. All these stories put us in the Christmas spirit—I know they do me.

So, what happened with this lesson for today? Where's the good news and the Christmas spirit in today's reading?

Well, as Advent begins, we enter into a period of waiting. In the secular world, children await Santa Claus coming on Christmas Eve, filling their stockings and leaving gifts. We await and anticipate family gatherings, Christmas parties and a lot of other fun things that only happen during this time of year. We await and we count off the days till Christmas is here.

Our notion of time is very linear, isn't it? Yesterday happened and now it is over. Today is here, and tomorrow will come, with today becoming yesterday. Time marches forward and never goes back.

In the church, however, time is cyclical. I remember the title of the first sermon I preached here to you: *Beginning in the Middle*, well, today, we are beginning at the end.

During this liturgical season of Advent we await the birth and return of our Savior, Jesus Christ. On this *first* Sunday of Advent, though, we are not quite ready to talk about the birth of Jesus.

You see, Advent is not only about the first coming of Christ, but also about the second coming of Christ at the end of time. We find ourselves today in history—in the in-between time of then

and then—The 1<sup>st</sup> Advent of Christ at his birth, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent of Christ when he returns.

The Christ for whom we watch for and wait upon in our text today is *not* the little babe lying in a manger—we know that story and what to expect from that. That story has already occurred in history. The Christ in our Scripture today is the not-yet come Christ about which we know very little.

Not knowing about what is going happen can produce a lot of anxiety with a good many folks. For those of us that are baby boomers we remember being in elementary school and going through the periodic safety drills known as “duck and cover.”

During the early part of the Cold War, when Americans feared a missile attack from the Soviet Union, it was common for teachers to instruct us students on what to do in the event of a nuclear war. If the air-raid sirens ever went off, the teachers told us, we were to immediately duck down under our desks, pull our knees up to our chins and cover our heads with our hands.

Today, of course, this advice and drill seem absolutely absurd. If a nuclear missile ever struck us, I don't think a desk or my hands covering my head are going to do much for me. They finally figured that out and that's why American schools stopped conducting duck and cover drills decades ago. They were pointless and only served to increase everyone's anxiety level.

The first few verses in our passage from Luke today were pretty anxiety-causing words for people in their day to hear, too. Jesus talked about the signs that would be coming—signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. He said there would be distress among nations and a roaring of the seas. He instructed us to anticipate—“to stand up and raise our heads; to be on guard.” We are called to pay attention.

Pay attention to what, though? People point to the signs that are happening in our world today. Look at the hurricanes and tsunamis—look at the turmoil between nations. There are wars, famines, political upheaval and acts of terror—the same sorts of signs Jesus was talking about. The end must be near! Is this what we are to pay attention to? Are these signs truly indications of the end of time and will we be ready to escape them if we have enough firepower and pray hard enough for them to stop?

And where is God in the middle of all this preparation? Is God sending the evil? If not, he certainly doesn't seem to be doing anything to prevent it!

Well you know, folks, cataclysmic events happen all the time. They have happened throughout history. And when they do, there is one thing we all seem to have in common--people are forced to face their own mortality. I truly think that is what the fear is all about. We don't want to die!

The only thing we know of for sure, is that **our** history **will** come to an end. We will all die one day, but before we do, we must rely on God's hand to guide us through this in-between time of then and then—between the day of our birth and the day of our death; between the 1<sup>st</sup> Advent of Jesus Christ and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent when he will come again.

Our focus should be on how we live and what we do. These things will bear witness to what ultimately rules our lives and that is the question we all face as Advent draws near—Who or what ultimately rules our lives.

Luke's words were written just as much for us today as they were those people thousands of years ago. They were written for people who *do* sometimes live in darkness and danger and despair. Jesus is saying that sometimes, bad things do happen to good people. In an unfinished world, a world of sin, a world of free will and selfish living and power politics, bad things happen to good people. Earthquakes happen, terrorism happens, wars and famine happen, babies die and cancer kills, but bad things are never the final word. Bad things are not the final word because we trust that God is still in charge. God is behind history, God is part of our on-going history, and God is marching in front of history.

When we read on in the text, we hear that Jesus knew; Jesus understood that folks would be anxious over their fate. He knew this because he knew their faith systems and empty rituals had failed. This Gospel teaches us that beyond the end of time stands the Lord, who stands among us as the person of Jesus.

Along with Christians across the globe, we lit this first Advent candle this morning in our four-week journey through the darkness of Advent. This year, this Advent, as we wait for the

first coming of Christ as well as the Advent of his final coming, I would like to suggest that rather than hiding in the secular sentimentality of Christmas, we open our eyes, we lift up our heads, we pay attention.

Do we know how to read the signs that are all around us? A fisherman knows how to read the water for a good catch; the expert sailor knows how to read the wind. Do we know how to read our fellow human beings—those, who along with us are creating history as we speak? Are we aware of those things that make up the connection between us all? Bonnie McLemore called this “the living human web—the intricate and profound connections which tie us together as God’s people.”

It is through this living human web that we are able to live out God’s purposes for our lives. We cannot be Disciples of Christ in isolation—we have to interact and sometimes rely on our fellow human beings. Sometimes, this takes a concerted effort; sometimes we really have to pay attention for us to notice we are a part of this human web.

During this season of Advent I suggest we all follow Jesus’ words that we pay attention and pray enthusiastically so we may hope to achieve the strength to escape the things that will take place and be equipped to stand before the Son of Man.

We are called to wait for God’s promises to be fulfilled. But it is not a passive waiting. In our time of waiting, we may rejoice in the small wonders and simple graces of these sometimes danger-filled days in-between the then and then.

Let us pray: Loving God, who sent your Son for us. Help us through this period of waiting. Help us to accept that we may have to go through some bad times in our lives before we meet you again.

Strengthen us to be your people. Instill in us a sense of wonder and awe during this Advent season as we patiently await the 1<sup>st</sup> coming of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.