

Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2005
Luke 21:25-36

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

An Advent “To Do” List

1. Watch
2. Listen
3. Pray

^{NIV} Luke 21:25 "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea.²⁶ Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.²⁷ At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.²⁸ When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."²⁹ He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees.³⁰ When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near.³¹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.³² "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.³⁴ "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.³⁵ For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth.³⁶ Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."

Fellow Redeemed,

She did it again. We have a friend who sends out her Christmas cards each year so that they arrive on the day after Thanksgiving. I admire her efficiency. Meanwhile, at our house, we only hope to get the cards done in time for the envelopes to bear a pre-Christmas postmark.

I'm hoping we're not alone in this. Your list of things to do before Christmas still has quite a few items on it, doesn't it: putting up lights, trimming the tree, purchasing gifts, maybe some baking and entertaining? I'm going to guess that most of us, instead of having extra time on our hands these days, are wondering how we're going to get it all done. And that's the point at which Jesus' words in today's Gospel lesson about being "weighed down by the anxieties of life" are quite timely. Jesus says here that amidst all the bustle and clamor of the Christmas season there's something that deserves to have a higher priority than the other items on our pre-Christmas "to do" list. Jesus actually presents an alternate "to do" list here. Call it **An Advent "To Do" List**. This list has these items: (1) Watch,

(2) Listen, and (3) Pray. Let's take some time this morning to explore Jesus' Advent "to do" list.

1. Watch

The first item on the Advent "to do" list is Watch. That is, watch for the signs of Jesus' return. At the beginning of this chapter Luke tells us that Jesus and his disciples had been at the temple in Jerusalem. The disciples, he says, were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. That's when Jesus took this pleasant conversation in a more serious direction. He said, "**As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.**" (21:6) As you can imagine, the disciples immediately wanted to know when these things were going to happen and what signs would say that these things are about to take place. So Jesus spoke to them in more detail about the destruction of Jerusalem which lay about 40 years in the future. But he also spoke about the cataclysmic events that will announce the end of the world.

Jesus says at the beginning of our Gospel lesson, "*There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.*" It sounds like a scene out of "War of the Worlds" and it doesn't sound much like Christmas. But even as we're preparing to celebrate Jesus' first coming into this world through his birth in Bethlehem, it's important to remember that his second coming will take place in much different fashion. Not quiet next time, but loud. Not unnoticed next time, but impossible not to notice. The first time a single star served as sign for the Wise Men. The second time there will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. God's sustaining word gives order to the heavens and keeps our planet orbiting the sun in the predictable way that it does. But if God withdrew that sustaining word, well, you'd have some very frightening events taking place in the heavens.

I saw a survey recently that said that 95% of Americans have plans to celebrate Christmas. What percentage do you think are planning to be ready to celebrate Jesus' second coming? I don't think it's 95%. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who don't have a good handle on why Jesus came the first time and are simply unprepared for him to come the second time. That's why Jesus says here, "Watch!" Take note of the signs! Like Jesus says, we're pretty good at picking up on some signs. When the trees begin leafing out we know that summer is coming. Even so, when we see the signs in the sun, moon and stars, when we see the heavenly bodies being shaken, we should conclude that the kingdom of God is near.

The reaction when the heavenly bodies are shaken and nations are in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea is fear. That's understandable. But Jesus says here, "*When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" Just as much as we sing at Christmas time "Joy to the World,"

so we can welcome Jesus at his second coming. Just as he came the first time to redeem us from sin and death by sacrificing his life for us, so he's coming the second time to redeem us from our bondage in this world of sin. When he comes again it will be to take all who believe in him to heaven. This is something to look forward to. We don't have to duck and hide. We can lift up our heads.

Does the thought of Jesus' coming thrill you? Do you live each day in anticipation of his coming? I'm not sure we always do. I'm reminded of the television commercial I've seen where a fellow answers his door and it's the sweepstakes prize patrol, excitedly telling him he's won the big prize. And he responds, "Thanks, I'm good." See, he's been investing his money wisely and doesn't need the big prize. Is that how we feel about the coming of Jesus? "Thanks, I'm good"? Maybe we're looking forward to a great celebration of Christmas or things are really going well with the job or the family. Is it to the point that if Jesus really did come tomorrow, we would react like a child who's called for dinner when he's engrossed in a TV show. "Awww! Do I have to?"

If there's a little bit of that in us, it's just an indication that we aren't thinking about how much we need Jesus. While the short term future might look good for some of us, the long term future—without Jesus—is unspeakably bleak for every one of us. The time is coming when earth's joys are going to grow dim and its glories are going to pass away. Without Jesus, we'd pass away too, like chaff in the wind. But by his first coming Jesus re-wrote our future. And at his second coming he is going to pluck us from this squalid vale of tears and put us down in the glorious future he's prepared for us in heaven. That's why even when the heavenly bodies are being shaken and the non-believing world is fainting with terror, we can stand up and lift up our heads. Our redemption is drawing near.

Being well-prepared for Jesus' coming is a matter of using our eyes and watching for the signs of his return. But there's also a role for our ears in preparing for Jesus to come. The second item on our Advent "to do" list is "Listen!"

2. Listen

To emphasize what he's been saying, Jesus adds, "*I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.*" Some people think that this passage is proof that Jesus was wrong. He thought Judgment Day was imminent, but 2000 years have passed, so he was wrong. Not only that generation but many generations since have passed from the scene. But as the footnote in the NIV indicates, the word Jesus uses here can also be translated "race." "This race," that is, the Jewish race, "will not pass away until all these things have happened." It makes sense that Jesus would be talking about the Jews here, because he had said a little earlier when he was talking about the destruction of Jerusalem that Jerusalem would be trampled on by the Gentiles. Here he says that the Jewish people as a distinct race will not have passed from the scene until he comes again.

Then he adds, "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*" Ever gone to the doctor's office and sat down in the waiting room, only to find that the only available

reading material was months old? How interesting was that? It's old news. You could say that those words have passed away. After a day or two, the newspaper isn't good for anything but lining the parakeet's cage. Not so with the words of Jesus. They will never pass away. They're always current, always relevant. This text is proof of that. Nearly 2000 years after Jesus said these things, we're still parsing the phrases to see what they mean and how they apply.

Since that's the case, it's important that we listen to God's Word. Whether that means reading it at home or joining with fellow believers to hear it here in church, God wants us to listen to his Word. Unfortunately, that's frequently one of the first casualties of this busy season. We shrug and say, "There's just no time." No time to sit at Jesus' feet. No time to let his law rebuke us or his gospel comfort us. Not possible to carve out a 90-minute block of time when God's Spirit can speak to our hearts. In reality, it's sometimes true that we're just showing God where he ranks on our "to do" list—far down the list.

That's why on the "to do" list God has prepared for us, it says, "Listen." This is the spirit that says with the boy, Samuel, "**Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.**" This is the spirit of Mary of Bethany, who by sat at Jesus' feet, listening to him and chose what is better. This is the spirit that recognizes that the Savior who is going to return one day in glory meets with us regularly in his Word to prepare us for that day. He prepares us by leading us to repent of our sins and by assuring us that our sins have been forgiven. He prepares us by telling us how to know that our redemption is drawing near. That's why we want to listen.

But I want to go back now to the subject of whether we'll be joyful or fearful at Christ's return. We've said that we Christians have every reason to be joyful, to stand up and lift up our heads because our redemption is drawing near. But what if we're still apprehensive of that day instead of joyful? The answer then is the third item on our Advent "to do" list: Pray.

3. Pray

Jesus says in the last verse of this section, "*Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.*" Watchfulness and prayer go hand in hand. What Jesus said to his disciples at that critical hour in Gethsemane, he still says to us today: Watch and pray. As we pray we acknowledge our dependence on God and turn our fears over to God, confident that he will hear us for Jesus' sake. When Jesus came back from praying in the Garden, he wanted to find his disciples praying. And when Jesus comes back from heaven, he wants to find us (his disciples) praying.

Isn't it ironic, then, that during this season when hear so many admonitions to watchfulness, there is also so much evidence of people's hearts are being "*weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life.*" Dissipation is excessive drinking. The thing about using alcohol as an escape is that the problems are still there afterwards—very likely

made worse by the excessive drinking. And these aren't the only things that dull our awareness to the approach of our Savior. Any behavior that has mastered us rather than our mastering it, can be a culprit, whether it's excessive time in front of the television, or excessive time on the computer, or excessive Christmas preparations.

In that palette of choices for how we'll spend our time, God calls on us to choose prayer. Praying doesn't weigh our hearts down; in prayer we lift our hearts up to God. Those who pray in Jesus' name have the assurance that God will hear and answer. He will answer our prayer by enabling us to escape and to stand before him on the day of his return. Our model for Advent might well be the prophetess, Anna, that elderly widow who, Luke tells us, "**worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.**" Anna's prayers were a heartfelt expression of her longing for the redemption of Jerusalem. And so are yours: Each time you pray, "Deliver us from evil," you are asking your Father not only to deliver you from evil, but also to grant you a blessed end and graciously take you from this world of sorrow to himself in heaven.

In the 21 days left until Christmas, I suppose most of us will be whittling away at our "to do" lists, trying to get it all done. Jesus isn't interested in adding to your list. He's not asking you to add a few more items way down on the bottom. He wants to replace your list. As you watch and listen and pray, all the other items on your list will be seen in their proper perspective. Seek first your Savior, and all these other things will be given to you as well. Amen.