

Message: Spiritual Safety in Times of Uncertainty**What would you do?**

What would you do if you knew the world was coming to an end? It’s an interesting question, isn’t it? There are many different ways to respond. There is a popular legend about Martin Luther. When asked what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow, Luther said, “I would plant an apple tree today.” What he’s saying is this: when we face today’s crises, we don’t despair. We act. Simple acts such as planting trees can send a powerful message to society of our belief in the future and our determination to make it a healthy one. Aside from any thoughts of the ‘end of the world’, we face the future with a sure and certain promise.¹

That promise is the very words of Jesus when he met the disciples on the mountain top in Galilee after he rose from the dead: “*Remember, I will walk with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20). For Christians, the question isn’t about the end of the world. The question is: how should we walk together with Jesus in these days with the signs of the times all around us?”²

It’s the first Sunday in the season of Advent, the beginning of the church year and 26 days until Christmas. It’s the year of the U.S. presidential election and bad choices. It’s a year when terrorism touched all our lives, from the attack on Charlie Hebdo in January to the recent Paris attacks. Attacks in Tunisia, Mali and the bombing of the Russian airliner in Egypt leave the world on the brink of war with the Islamic State while Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the regime. It’s a year when students on university campuses became targets. It’s a year of financial crisis in Greece and the fall of corrupt political leaders and officials around the world. It’s a year when the United Nations estimates there were a record number of refugees fleeing Syria, Afghanistan and other areas of conflict, 59.5 million, far exceeding the previous record of 35.8 million persons displaced. It’s the year of El Niño, killer mud slides, floods and drought, deadly heat waves, deadly

¹ Adeyemo, *African Bible Commentary*, 2010, p. 1272

² *Ibid*

earthquakes and wildfires, and the strongest hurricanes ever recorded make landfall.

It’s a year when racism took center stage; when those filled with prejudice – in and out of uniform, murdered others, even after sitting through an hour-long Bible study. It’s a year when more than 30 million people flocked to see Pope Francis in the U.S., yet church attendance dropped with many opting to be “Nones” – spiritual but with no religion.

Are these signs of our times? Yes, they are. Are they the signs of nations in chaos and change in our environment? Most definitely. Are they the kind of signs that have us racing for our Bibles to look up the book of Revelation, reading commentaries and fictional stories to fuel our imaginations? Yep. My question for you is: why? What are you hoping to learn? Our Scripture for today helps us and sets the tone for the season of Advent.

In Luke 21:25-36, Jesus gives us a prophecy, tells a story to illustrate the prophecy, and then calls us to prepare ourselves for what is to come. Certainly, when we read Jesus’ words about “*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*” in vv25-26, there’s no question that he’s trying to get our attention. Jesus tells us how we will respond in v27, “*People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*”

This is apocalyptic, “end times” language. It brings up images of guys wearing sandwich boards that say, “Repent for the End is Near.” I don’t know about you, but I find it hard to be with people who have a strong, prophetic voice. Theirs is a spiritual gift that is powerful, but difficult to live.

It’s difficult because it evokes fear. We are uncertain about the future of our loved ones – our children and grandchildren. We’re uncertain about our own health and safety. And we don’t want to lose what we have, because we all see the images of people who have lost their homes, possessions and jobs. We see the homeless people on our street and, for some of us, we know that six months’ hard times could land us on those very streets with those very people we fear today.

What a way to begin Advent, Christmas and the church year! In the middle of the season of abundance, when we're filled with gratitude for everything we have, we get a sobering and even startling message.

What's up? Jesus is calling us to take a stand, saying in v28 "*...Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" Rather than living half a life, a life filled with fear of what's happening, Jesus is calling us to embrace the life we have because of Christ. Jesus' disciples are called to pray and be on guard. Our friends may betray us, our spouses may leave us and our children may disappoint us, but, as he tells us in v18, "*not a hair of your head will perish.*" We will be spiritually safe and secure even when things are unsecure all around us.

We are God's children, the children God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the spiritual heirs of the kingdom of God. From the moment we committed our lives to Jesus, believing in our hearts and confessing with our mouths that "*Jesus is Lord*", we have been his. Jesus is our Savior. Jesus gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit which lives in every one who believes, sustaining and guiding us through life, giving hope.

God's children are the only ones who have hope in the darkness. God's children are given the courage to stand and raise their heads when others cower and run in fear. God's children have fear, but our fear is a fear of God. That doesn't mean we fear God's retaliation or vengeance if we slip and fall. What it means is that we fear what it would be like to try to live life without God's presence to lift us up and care for us. God is so awesome and all-encompassing that we fear what it would mean to live without God. It's like trying to imagine living in a world with no sun or moon, only coldness and darkness. Or like trying to breath in a place where there's no oxygen. It's scary to think about.

When you listen to the words of Luke 2, the story of the birth of Jesus in the manger, what do you hear? Do you hear the cry of a newborn, helpless baby, who fell prey to those with selfish ambition, afraid of the signs of their times? Or do you hear the choir of angels, singing of God's glory, the prophecy of the King of Kings fulfilled; God's own Son come to earth to save us?

There’s a difference between those views and yet there’s also harmony. Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the one who has ruled the universe for all time, left heaven and came down to earth as a baby, shocking and surprising us. The Deliverer came, not to seek an earthly kingdom, but to bring the Kingdom of God to us. Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph, but he came with a mission and a purpose: he came to make things right with God, to establish a new, covenant relationship between humanity and God.

The season of Advent was originally a time of preparation for baptism into the church, part of confirmation. It was like Lent.

Advent is the time when we remember and reflect on the true meaning of Christmas. Christ isn’t going to come again as a child, powerless and helpless, subject to the rulers of this world. We will “*see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.*” Jesus gives us this prophecy in v27. And we can trust him. After all, Jesus’ prophecies came true: the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, which is the fulfillment of the original prophecy in this text. Jesus also predicted his death and resurrection, which happened. When Jesus tells us he’ll come to earth for a second time, filled with power and awe-inspiring glory, this is the image of a King’s return.

Jesus gives us a different view of his return: he tells us to look at the trees. Actually, Jesus tells us to watch for leaves to sprout on the trees. Fig trees are a common image used by Jesus. They refer to the leaders and the people of Israel. Leaves sprouting on fig trees mean that fruit is beginning to appear. The fruit is the fruit of salvation, a sign that the Holy Spirit is active. True signs of the times will be accompanied by a revival of faith, beginning with the leaders of the church and spreading to all people, including God’s chosen people, the people of Israel. When revival spreads across the world like wildfire with people coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ, Jesus’ words will be fulfilled and he will come again.

So don’t be troubled about the times. Jesus is with us and we have the guarantee of his promise, the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Jesus gives us some advice in vv34-36. We’re to be on guard, be alert and to pray. We must always be on guard against those things that steal

our energy and vitality away from Christ. We must be on guard against anything that causes us to lose our gratitude, lose our joy, lose our passion and drive to love and care for others.

That’s what dissipation is. It can take several forms: Jesus mentions drunkenness and worries of life. This is not a condemnation against drinking or worrying, as long as you have self-control and you serve God willingly and freely every day. If you find yourself turning to a bottle, pills or other forms of self-medication to deal with the challenges of life more often than you turn to Jesus for help, then you need to examine your heart. I am available for spiritual counsel and guidance if you need help.

Self-reliance sneaks up on us like a trap set for someone who isn’t expecting one. When we depend almost entirely on our own knowledge and expertise and seldom refer to the Bible, Church guidelines and the wisdom and experiences of others, we’re in a position of weakness. You may be surprised to hear me say this, but you don’t have to come to church to have a relationship with Christ. You got that wherever you committed your life to him. However, if you want to grow spiritually and live a life devoted to Christ, you need to be with a group of believers. And guess where the best place for that is? The church.

We are better together. We may struggle and have difficult times. After all, we’re flawed as humans. But it’s worth putting up with each other. That’s because when God’s Spirit is moving in a church, the people are looking forward to Christ’s coming with joy and anticipation, not fear and dread. When God’s Spirit is moving in a church, people really care about one another, reaching out to help each others, calling and checking up with one another, and getting involved with the messiness of each other’s lives out of love. When God’s Spirit is moving in a church, people gather and pray for one another, praying for strength and courage to face our fears over the signs of the times, confident in our faith and love of Christ.

During this season of Advent, I invite you to celebrate Christ’s birth and prepare yourselves for the judgment to come. Let us reflect on Christ’s second coming, safely secure in a world filled with uncertainty.

Let us pray...

Jeremiah 33:14-16 (NRSV)

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Luke 21:25-36 (NRSV)

“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 powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”