

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
11/29/2015, The First Sunday of Advent  
Luke 21:25-36  
Your Redemption Draweth Nigh

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning speaks of the stars. It is from St. Luke Chapter 21, beginning with verse 25:

[Jesus said] And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, <sup>26</sup>men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; (Luke 21:25-26, RSV)

In the earlier parts of St. Luke 21, Jesus speaks of end-time troubles besetting the earth — our good, old planet. He speaks of “wars and commotions” (Luke 21:9, KJV), of “nation arising against nation and kingdom against kingdom” (Luke 21:10, KJV). He says “great earthquakes shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences” (Luke 21:11, KJV). That is, Jesus speaks of troubles and suffering that humanity has known in the past, to our sorrow, and might know again in the future.

But now, in this morning’s reading, Jesus expands his horizon and speaks of troubles we have not yet known — troubles in sun and moon and stars. He also speaks of our earth, but with a disturbing image I feel we have not yet experienced: I mean the sea, I mean the “roaring of the sea.” Jesus is not speaking of sailors being frightened by the roaring the sea and the waves. Rather Jesus speaks of the “nations” being in distress “and perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves.” I picture the Midwestern farmer, then, being appalled by the noise of the sea. I picture landlocked Switzerland being troubled by the roar of the oceans and the waves thereof. Something is afoot, something awful is happening, strange things are taking place. This roaring of the sea and of the waves is part of the misery of which Jesus speaks: “men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world.”

But think of those stars. Those stars are humanity’s ancient image of stability, ancient means of orientation. If only the nighttime clouds would break, so that the ship captain could see the stars again: then he could get his ship back on track. If he can glance at those stars, maybe he can avoid the shipwreck and the loss of all his crew. Let the lost woodsman can catch sight of the morning star, then maybe he will have a chance. Maybe he will survive...because you can count on the stars. They will set your path straight.

Only, Jesus is speaking *of signs* “in sun and moon and stars.” These are cosmic troubles. These are disruptions of settled realities — commotions that cause people to faint with fear.

Indeed, in the parallel passages in St. Matthew and St. Mark, Jesus speaks not only of signs in the stars, but of the stars falling from heaven (Matthew 24:29; Mark 13:25). From time to time, we might enjoy seeing a shooting star. It would be something entirely different for us to look up in the nighttime sky and see the stars from falling heaven.

This image of the stars falling has caught the imagination of humanity, from hymns to rock and roll. Next Sunday, for example, we will sing, or the Choir will sing for us, “My Lord, what a morning”:

My Lord, what a morning;  
My Lord, what a morning;  
Oh, my Lord, what a morning,  
When the stars begin to fall.  
(ELW 438)

And back in 1970 the Moody Blues spoke of those falling stars, also with reference to the end of the ages:

When all the stars are falling down  
Into the sea and on the ground  
And angry voices carry on the wind (“Melancholy Man,” The Moody Blues, 1970)

Altogether, things will have reached an astounding state when there are signs in sun and moon and stars, the nations are distressed and perplexed at the roaring of the sea, and people are fainting with fear and foreboding at what is coming on the world.

Then, suddenly, Jesus shifts the mood. He speaks of our redemption. When things are falling apart and all the world has become strange and threatening, Jesus says that we should “look up and raise your heads” (Luke 21:28). It is an image of encouragement, almost of defiance. Jesus says that “when these things begin to take place” then we are to look up and raise our heads. We are to buck the despondency. We are to shake off the disorientation. We are look up with expectancy, for, as Jesus puts, “your redemption draweth nigh” (Luke 21:28, KJV). No need to wait for the cosmic troubles to pass. Right in the midst of them — right amidst the falling of the stars and the roaring of the seas — we are invited to be on our tiptoes with hope, for our redemption draws near.

In this sermon, I want to consider three possible meanings of our Lord’s prophecy. The first one is the most obvious meaning of our text: Jesus is talking about the end of this part of the human story. He is talking about the end-time troubles before he comes again to reign forever as King of kings and Lord of lords.

But there are two other possible meanings of this prophecy. Here I note the simple human reality that there are times, short of the end time, when life might feel to us as if everything is falling apart. Here I am not speaking of the vast human story. I am simply speaking of you and me. There are times when chaos breaks upon us. There are times when we might well faint with fear and foreboding at what is happening. So let us speak of two distressing times that might come our way. One is sure to come our way, if the Lord tarries. I mean, the approach of our own death. When our bodies and their organs are breaking down, and medicine has done all it can do for us, then too we can take the words of our Lord Jesus to heart:

And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up,  
and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.  
(Luke 21:28, KJV)

And the last case of which I want to speak is the season of turmoil — not the approach of death, but simply the approach of mayhem — that sometimes breaks upon people, including upon Christians. Perhaps you have been spared that so far. I hope so. But life is not always easy, also for the Christian. There can be hard seasons to try to weather — times when things become uncertain and disorienting, times when you feel parched and hard-pressed. Then too you can take these apocalyptic words of Jesus and apply them to yourself: “look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.” The Bible gives us reason for hope in distressing times, even if those distressing times are not yet the end time before the Second Coming of Jesus.

So, those are my three cases: (1) The end of this part of the human story, when the stars begin to fall, the seas roar, and people faint with fear and foreboding at what is happening to the world. (2) The personal crisis represented by the approach of death. And (3) Those perplexing and distressing seasons of life when nothing seems to be working right.

## **THE END TIMES**

So, the first case: the signs in sun and moon and stars before Jesus comes again. Please note the way I have been phrasing this time: It is the end of *this part* of the human story. It is not the end of humanity. The story of humanity is not drawing to a close, but rather this part of the story is reaching its pinnacle — this beginning part, this entrance time to eternity, this narthex before entering the great cathedral, this mere speck of sand compared to the seashores of all the oceans. It is not the human story that is drawing to a close in this morning’s Bible reading, for *the Church* will continue, as Jesus promises, and the church is made up of people:

...and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew  
16:18, KJV)

Our Lord's images of those end times sound like the gates of hell are pounding on earth. It sounds ominous to think of signs in sun and moon and stars and of the seas roaring so that whole nations are left in distress. Chaos, confusion, and profound fear are stalking the world. You get the feeling that little can protect people from this fear — neither their money nor their educations. Things are at a bad pitch. But then come along the blessed words of Jesus:

...look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh. (Luke 21:28, KJV)

For all we know, our generation will be the generation to experience these things. The Church has been waiting for two thousand years for Jesus to come again. Jesus tells us that there will be distress in heaven and earth as he approaches, and we might be the ones to experience that cosmic distress. If so, Jesus would have us understand that things are never really out of control — not even if the stars should begin to fall. Rather, our redemption is drawing near, and that is a good thing.

So, that is my first case. It is the obvious meaning of this morning's Gospel Lesson: reality is in for some troubles before Jesus comes again, but he will come again and so our redemption will draw near.

## **THE APPROACH OF DEATH**

Next, let's consider that personal, individual crisis in human life represented by the approach of death. Some people die suddenly. They die in a sudden accident or a quick heart attack, or they die peacefully in their sleep. But for some people, the approach of death is akin to the chaos pictured in our Gospel Lesson. Nothing is working out. Organs and systems that used to work fine are breaking down. Medicine has done all it can. The end approaches. For a Christian, this chaotic time also means that "your redemption draweth nigh."

Back in 2005, the evangelist Billy Graham was eighty-seven years old and still preaching. Some of us in this congregation heard him preach at the Billy Graham Crusade over in Queens at Flushing Meadows. One of the touching moments for me was when Billy Graham spoke of his colleague — the Gospel-singer George Beverly Shea, who was even older than he was. Billy Graham notes that they were getting on in years and that "ere long" they would be heading off to heaven to bend their knees before Jesus. Well, George Beverly Shea — the great baritone famous for his rendition of "How Great Thou Art" — has since died. He died in 2013 at age 104. And I like to imagine those two old friends as death approached. I can almost imagine Billy Graham comforting his old friend saying, "Hold your head up, George, your redemption draweth nigh."

It is the same thing you can say to anyone else or can whisper to yourself someday: "There is a lot about life I do not understand. But this I firmly believe:

you and I are in the hands of Jesus. We draw nigh to him, day by day, moment by moment. And this is a good thing. Indeed it is a good thing worth living for now and every day that remains to us.”

## **SEASONS OF TROUBLE**

Finally, let me speak of those chaotic seasons of life when it feels to you that the stars might as well be falling and the seas might as well be roaring, because everything else seems to be going wrong too. Finances, vocation, romance, health, your life’s work — everything can feel as if it is falling apart. If so, I think it is legitimate to borrow the words of Jesus in today’s reading and apply them to yourself in those tough times:

...look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh. (Luke 21:28, KJV)

The good old Biblical grounds for applying these words to yourself is the constant teaching that our God, the majestic Maker of heaven and earth, especially attends to the lowly. When the Psalmist cries out to God,

<sup>141</sup>I am small and despised... (Psalm 119:141, KJV)

the Psalmist can be certain that our God hears his prayer. Let him be small and despised. Let him be mocked and maltreated. Let him be discounted, overlooked, and run over. Let him or her be down and out. Let him or her be under assault by heaven and earth. Let the very stars fall from the sky and the seas roar in her head. Nonetheless, in all of that, if we would have him, our God will draw nigh to the lowly one:

For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly... (Psalm 138:6, RSV)

In fact, this seems to be the marching orders for Jesus. When you or I are lowly and life is at its worst pitch, then remember the willingness of Jesus to leave heaven behind and come to dwell with us. He not only “regards” the lowly, but he also hastens to save them.

In all circumstances then, let us lift up our heads and be confident for our redemption draws nigh. Indeed our Redeemer draws nigh, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.