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

This morning’s Gospel Lesson, from Luke 21, is a rather frightening reading. It speaks of signs in sun and moon and stars. Perhaps all the stars will be falling down, into the sea and on the ground.¹ St. Luke says that nations will be in distress and people will be fainting with “fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world.” But in spite of these disturbing words, Martin Luther loved this passage. It was because of the word “redemption.” And so that is my opening text for this morning. Saint Luke 21 verse 28 goes this way:

28Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:28, RSV)

Now, that word “redemption” is a sweet word. Luther points out that if all these perplexing and distressing signs mean that redemption is drawing near, then let it be so. In an Advent sermon on our text, Luther says this:

Therefore, He uses the sweet word “redemption,” which all hearts gladly hear. What is redemption? Who would not gladly be redeemed? Who would desire to remain in such a desert, both of sin and of punishment? Who would not wish an end to such misery, such danger for souls, such ruin for man—especially when Christ so sweetly allures, invites, and comforts us? (LW 75:105).

The times seemed bad to Martin Luther, back in the 1500s when he was preaching. The times always seem to be bad, sorry to say. But Luther’s goal in his moving Advent sermon on our text was to somehow cheer us up about the times. No matter how awful things might be, Luther wanted to comfort his people by saying that redemption is drawing near, and that is a great thing. In this sermon I want to carry on in Luther’s way. I want to say that we are closer now to our redemption than we have ever been in the past, and this is a reason for us to be encouraged.

¹ A line from the Moody Blues “Melancholy Man.”
Let me begin by briefly commenting on our First Lesson. It is from Jeremiah 33. Jeremiah speaks of a “righteous Branch.” As I read the passage aloud, try to catch the emphasis on what the LORD means to do. He is not talking about what you or I mean to do, but about what He himself means to do. The passages goes this way:

14 Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (Jeremiah 33:14-15, RSV)

When Jeremiah speaks of a “righteous Branch,” he is referring to a descendant of King David – a worthy successor to King David. The first successor to King David was his son Solomon. The Lord made a great promise to Solomon that his descendents would sit upon the throne of Israel. But there was a condition to this promise. The promise depended upon Solomon and his descendents walking in the way of the Lord. Here are the words the Lord spoke to Solomon:

4 As for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, 5 then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised your father David, saying, ‘There shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel. (1 Kings 9:4-5, NRSV)

But the thing is, the descendents of King David, by and large, did not walk in the way of the Lord. The chief evidence of that was the suffering of the people. There was injustice in the land. The strong took advantage of the weak. It was not the kind of society that the Lord wanted. The prophet Jeremiah was keenly aware of that in his generation, and he thundered away against injustice in the land. But in this passage, our Old Testament reading for this morning, Jeremiah is not thundering away against unjust or incompetent rulers. Instead he is talking about what the Lord is determined to do. The Lord is determined to establish a ruler in Israel who will in fact walk in the ways of the Lord. And so Jeremiah prophesies about the coming “Branch of David.” Again, listen to what the Lord intends to do:
In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (Jeremiah 33:14-15, RSV)

To my mind, this is mercy. Divine mercy! It is as if the Lord knows about our human race that we are not capable of establishing justice and the conditions necessary for the flourishing of people. At least we are not capable of it for any long stretch of time. We might have a good ruler, a good teacher, or a good boss for a while, but then we lose them, and the next ruler might not be so good. Things might well drift back toward chaos and unfairness.

Think of that phrase that Luther used when talking about redemption. He used the word “desert.” He raised his moving question:

Who would not gladly be redeemed? Who would desire to remain in such a desert, both of sin and of punishment?

There are a lot of good people in our world, including you and people you have known over the course of your life. And yet somehow put all the good people in the world together, and we still seem to be a troubled world. This is our age-old condition: we live in a desert, buffeted by both sin and punishment. No good thing seems to last forever, not even our health, not even our youth, not even the health of our land and community.

And so, in the mercy of our God, Jeremiah promises a Branch of David who will rule with integrity. And then, in this morning’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus promises that he will come again. He will come as the promised Branch of David. Our Gospel Lesson for this morning has troubling and frightening images, but for all that, Jesus also speaks comforting words to us. He refers to the tilt of our heads. Listen to what he says:

Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:28, RSV)

Jesus has been speaking of scary things – signs in sun and moon and stars and of people fainting for fear. In such circumstances it is natural for our heads to droop and our shoulders to sag and for our hearts to be discouraged. It is entirely natural. But Jesus comes along and says that even in such troubling and frightening circumstances, we should lift up our heads from our chest, look up with hope and expectation, and realize that our redemption is drawing near.

When Luther tries to console his people by speaking, for example, of our redemption drawing near, it is important to realize that many people in that
day and age lived in terror of eternal judgment. I suspect it is hard for us to imagine the fear of eternal condemnation suffered by medieval people. And so Luther knew that people would have mixed emotions about the news that our redemption is drawing near. They worried whether they would qualify for that redemption, or rather, for something much worse! And so Luther goes on and preaches these encouraging words:

But you say, “I would indeed await and love this coming if I were godly and without sin.” Answer:... There is no one so well prepared for the Last Day as he who desires to be without sin. If you have such a desire, what do you fear? You are then in perfect accord with that day. It comes to set free from sin all who desire it, and you also are of the opinion that you will be set free in that way. Thank God; remain and continue in that opinion. Christ says His coming is for our redemption.

And so Luther would have both his people and you and me to be encouraged. Let Advent be a happy time for us. Our Redeemer draws near, both to the manger in Bethlehem and at the end of the age. Both are good!

As I near the end of this sermon, I encourage us to apply the good news of our redemption not only to the rise and fall of nations, but also to our own individual lives. Imagine a stretch of life in which we are battered and discouraged and nothing seems to be going right. But then we remember the words of Jesus, and we reflect that for him, the outcome of our life is going to be good. He is determined that it should be so. We could be sick, we could even be on our deathbed, and still it would be right for us to take this passage of Scripture and apply it to ourselves. Come what may, no matter how troubling or frightening, Jesus would have us look up and raise our heads and to know that our redemption is drawing near. Not a thing on this earth can deprive us of that, because not a thing on this earth can stop Jesus from the thing he wants to do. And what Jesus wants to do, about everything else, is to save you, to save me. Redemption is what is on his mind.

This is the first Sunday of Advent. This is the start of that holy season of the church year when the Church joins Israel in longing for the Messiah. This is the season dedicated to a hope that will not fail us. This is the season when

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we stand tiptoe, as it were, and look ahead to the promised Messiah. We know who he is. In fact, we live for him, and our life is at its best when we are waiting for our Redeemer, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.