

“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.” (Luke 21:25-36)

Don't Let your Heart be Weighed Down!

How do you feel about the end of the world? That might seem like a funny question, but today is the first Sunday in Advent. And this season connects with the four Sundays that went before it, a time we call End Times. So today, once more, we're talking about Jesus' return. So, how do you feel about the end of the world? I had very mixed feelings about it when I was child. I looked forward to Jesus coming. I wanted to see him. But I lived next door to a kid who went to a different church. They spent a lot of time talking about the end of the world and they didn't have the clearest understanding of what God says. They had a tract ministry. They passed out little books of cartoons to bring people to Jesus. Unfortunately, a huge number of those little cartoons dealt with how they imagined the world was going to end. I got a lot of those cartoon books from that neighbor kid. I can remember sitting in my bed at night thinking about the scary things in those comic books and worrying that all that was going to happen soon. Now, maybe nobody else here had a neighbor like that. But modern Christians are really good at making Judgment Day scary. That makes the word that Jesus says to us this morning that much more meaningful. What does he tell us when we face all the real and even the imagined terrors of the end of the world? **Don't let your heart be weighed down!**

I. Instead of terror, lift up your heads!

II. Instead of partying, watch and pray!

I.

Now, the text that we have before us today is kind of a difficult section of God's Word. Partly, that's because Jesus was talking to his disciples about the future. Some of what he says would happen during their lifetime, some of it shortly after they lived and much of was going to continue until Jesus comes back. The conversation began when the disciples asked Jesus, **“Teacher, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”** Unfortunately, the way they asked the question contributes to our confusion. You see, Jesus had told them that one day the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed. The disciples assumed that Jesus must be talking about the end of the world. But they were wrong. The temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. But Jesus understood their question and he gave an answer that included both the destruction of the temple and the end of the world.

He started by pointing to the signs of the end. He spoke about false Christs and false teachers. He mentioned wars and famines and earthquakes and signs in the sky. He told them they would be persecuted. And about all that he said, **“These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.”** Since the day Jesus ascended into heaven, there has always been war. Earthquakes and natural disasters happen every year. False teachers and persecution are a way of life for the church. There have even been signs in the sky throughout the New Testament era. In the past, every eclipse and every comet caused people to wonder if that was the end of the world. Those things are common to human history and they have causes that can be

identified and researched, so our modern society laughs at the idea that they have any meaning from God at all. But they are all signs to remind us that Jesus is coming back.

All that comes before our text for this morning. But when we get to our text, Jesus said, **“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.”** Now, that’s pretty scary stuff, right? Nations in anguish and perplexity. Signs in the sun moon and stars. People fainting from terror. But did you notice that what Jesus mentions here isn’t really any different from the signs he mentioned before when he said that the end will not come right away? To be sure, these verses imply that they will be more intense than ever before. But Jesus does not really promise something radically new. Even the signs in the sun, moon and stars are probably still naturally occurring phenomena that a scientist would explain away.

So that leaves us with a big question: where are we in relation to Jesus’ return? The answer is simply that God set it up in such a way that his people can always expect him to return during their lifetime. How many of the signs can you check off? Signs in the sun, moon and stars? Well, right now there’s a hurricane raging on Jupiter that’s bigger than the earth. Last week, scientists discovered a black hole so large that 17 billion suns could fit inside it. Check that one off. Roaring and tossing of the sea? Hurricane Sandy permanently changed the coastline of New Jersey. Check. Wars and rumors of wars? Between Syria and the Palestinians and the Republicans and Democrats arguing over the “fiscal cliff,” I think we can check that one off, too. We can even check off people fainting in terror, apprehensive about what is coming on the world. Only today, we don’t faint. We go to therapy. But people are terrified, make no mistake about it. All those scary things are happening, right now. Who knows what next year will bring?

If we do go over the fiscal cliff, if we do intervene in Syria, if we start to see supernovas and meteor showers and everything that has seemed safe and familiar to us is suddenly upside-down, how will you feel? Will you faint from stress and apprehension? Will you stay up at night like I used to do when that neighbor kid passed me his tracts? All those things are scary. I hope and pray that we don’t live through them. But even if we don’t, I will still go to hospitals and try to comfort people who are dying or sick or overwhelmed by the hurt in their lives. I will still have to listen to TV stars and musicians trying to shove abortion and gay marriage down my throat. I will still have to live in a country that spends hundreds of billions of dollars on the most advanced military in the world because we need it. It would still be easy to faint from apprehension – or to need a therapist.

But Jesus says, **“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”** All that bad news means one thing to you and me: Jesus is coming back. When I was a missionary in Colombia, there was an earthquake in Bogota. It wasn’t a big one, but it shook a lot of buildings and a lot of people were very frightened. Well, on the day that quake hit, a member of our congregation was on his way to teach a class about electrical engineering at one of the universities in town. When he got there, his students were gathered outside and quite worked up. He asked them, “Do you know what this earthquake means?” Now, these were intelligent, well educated young people. They had at least a basic understanding of the scientific causes for earthquakes. But the professor told them, “It means that the world is coming to an end, just like Jesus said.” That’s the lesson we’re supposed to take away from all that we see going on around us.

Sure, you can always point to some scientific principle or some political or historical or cultural reality that’s driving the events and that hides the hand of God. But the hand of God is there. And all those signs call us to have a different attitude: hope and joy. We lift up our heads because maybe this earthquake, or this political upheaval, or this persecution, or this sign in the sky will be followed by Jesus coming on the clouds of heaven. Jesus says that all those signs mean our redemption is drawing near. The Greek word for redemption means to buy someone out of slavery. Today, we live in slavery to death. If you’re my age, you’re just beginning to feel the effects of death creeping up on you. But even if you’re the age of the baby we baptized this morning, death is still coming for you. We live in slavery to sin. Can you imagine getting through even one day without sinning? I can’t. We live in slavery to fear of all the scary things out there. But when Jesus returns, he will free us from that slavery. So see every disaster as one more sign that he is near. **Don’t let your heart be weighed down! Instead of terror, lift up your heads!**

II.

On a practical level, we have to assume that Jesus is coming today, so we have to be ready. And at the same time, we have to assume that he's not coming today, so we have to do the work that he has given us: preach the gospel, testify to those who persecute us, support the work of the church, raise Christian children, care for aging parents, be faithful employees, go to school and so on and so on. We have to be ready for both things. In that tension between him coming now or not yet, Jesus issues a warning: **“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.”**

Be careful or our hearts will be weighed down. Could he have come up with a better description of life today? So many things seem to weigh us down. Jesus points us to “dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life.” Do you know what dissipation is? The new version of our NIV Bible uses the word “carousing.” I think “partying” might be a good modern equivalent. I was struck by the three terms Jesus put together: partying, drinking and anxiety. Does that seem like a strange combination to you? It does *not* to me. Quite often, people who have a drinking problem (or a substance abuse problem) also have an anxiety problem. They drink, they party, they flutter like social butterflies from one wild time to the next, all because they're trying to distract themselves from the anxiety that's eating them up inside. Do you know how common anxiety is? In my ministry, I've seen children consumed by it and I've seen retired people burn up their supposed “golden years” struggling with it. I've seen it at every age in between. In a sinful world, bad things happen to us and we all dread some personal nightmare.

We live in a society that loves to use recreation and sports and vacations and partying as a way to stop thinking about all that anxiety. Now I'm not saying there's anything wrong with socializing and we Lutherans do not believe that God thinks all smiles and laughter are sins. Nor do we believe that drinking a beer is sinful. But God does hate drunkenness and God does hate it when we hide behind the flimsy pleasures of this life instead of coming to him. God hates it when we let that stuff consume our lives.

Those things will make Judgment Day fall on us like a trap. How? We put all our energy into those things and we forget to feed our faith. And all those ways of running away from anxiety lead us away from God, because there is no Christ in them. What's the solution? Repentance. We need to recognize how easy it is for us to neglect our faith and follow the meaningless and even sinful pleasures of our age. We need to see the weakness of our own sinful hearts. We need to trust that in Christ all that sin and weakness is taken away. Then, Jesus tells us to watch and pray. Those are the fruits of repentance. We keep watch over our hearts and our lives. We flee from those sinful desires that we are particularly prone to. And instead of chasing the empty distractions of this life, we come to God for relief from our fear and anxiety. We remember his love at the cross and the empty tomb. We ask him to give us the strength to resist all sin and fear. God will answer that prayer. He will work through the gospel to give us strength and even joy while we struggle with life here. My friends, **don't let your hearts be weighed down. Instead of partying, watch and pray.**

Our society thinks that relief can be found in carousing and drinking, in the internet and social media – in anything but Christ. But real peace and joy don't come from any of those things. When we watch and pray, when we rejoice at every sign of Jesus' return, then we lift our hearts up instead of letting them be weighed down. Christ comes to us in that attention to his love and work. The solution to anxiety is knowing that our Savior is doing all things to bring us home to heaven. His return will free us from everything that scares us here. Until that day comes, watch and pray. Amen.