

“Be on Watch”

Harry Heintz shared, “During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives: On May 19th, 1780 the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, **‘The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought.’**” Heintz concluded, “Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful till Christ returns. Instead of fearing the dark, we’re to be lights as we watch and wait.” (Harry Heintz)

When you heard and/or read the words from verses 25 through 27 how did they strike you? Did those verses encourage fear or amazement? Does this awesome scene – its wonder lead you to faithfulness – to being a light as you watch and wait? Consider again **verses 25-27, “There will be strange things happening to the sun, the moon, and the stars. On earth whole countries will be in despair, afraid of the roar of the sea and the raging tides. People will faint from fear as they wait for what is coming over the whole earth, for the powers in space will be driven from their courses. Then the Son of Man will appear, coming in a cloud with great power and glory.”** After hearing Jesus say all that, one would certainly be in a state of awe and wonder!

“Virginia Owens in her book, *And The Trees Clap Their Hands*, suggests that we lose the wonder of it all, because along the way everything becomes ‘merely.’ Things are ‘merely’ stars, sunset, rain, flowers, and mountains. Their connection with God’s creation is lost. During this Advent season many things are just ‘merely.’ It becomes ‘merely’ Bethlehem, a stable, a birth – we have no feeling of wonder or mystery. That is what familiarity can do to us over the years.

Owens goes on to say that it is this ‘merely’ quality of things that leads to crime. It is ‘merely’ a thing – I’ll take it. It is ‘merely’ an object – I’ll destroy it. It is this ‘merely’ quality of things and life that leads to war. We shall lose ‘merely’ a few thousand men, but it will be worth it.” **“Within the Advent narrative nothing is ‘merely.’ Things are not ‘merely’ things, but are part of God’s grand design.”** “Common things, such as motherhood, a birth, a child, now have new meaning. This is not ‘merely’ the world, but a world that is charged with the beauty and grandeur of God’s design. It is a world so loved by God that God gave his only Son. What is so great about the Advent season is that everything appears charged with the beauty and grandeur of God.” (John A. Stroman, God’s Downward Mobility, CSS Publishing.)

Our Gospel Reading goes on to report Jesus said in **verse 28, “When these things begin to happen, stand up and raise your heads, because your salvation is near.”** While discussing this verse, Mark Trotter wrote, “That’s been the experience of Christians for all these years. Whether they are in exodus, or in exile, we are not alone.”

Trotter continued, “Our four year old grandson has provided me a wonderful illustration of this. His mother was going to go away for a couple of days. The night before she left, as she was in the two boys’ room to hear their prayers, she told them she was going to go away, and asked if in their prayers they would like to ask God to protect her on her journey.

Jesse, the six year old, thought not. But Luke, the four year old, prayed this prayer: **‘Dear God, if buffaloes or bears, or other mean animals, come near mommy, can you handle it? If you can’t, just call on Jesus.’**”

Trotter explained, “Luke attends a Nazarene preschool. I suspect that is where he got that accent. But the words are universally Christian. There is a new covenant now, a new promise, since Christmas, that he will be with us, ‘Lo, I am with you always till the end of the age.’ That’s our hope.” Trotter concluded, **“There is a way of living with that hope. It is found in two words that are always associated with Advent: wait, and watch.”** (Mark Trotter, Collected Sermons, CSS Publishing Company, Inc.)

The three Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke then went on to report Jesus gave the illustration of the changes in the leaves of the fig tree signaling the coming of summer. **Jesus said in verse 31, “In the same way, when you see these things happening, you will know that the Kingdom of God is about to come.”** Instead of

instilling fear, Jesus alerted his disciples – his followers to how the dramatic events and changes he mentioned heralded the breaking in of God’s Kingdom!

I won’t be discussing what Jesus meant in verses 32 and 33 because frankly, the source of those verses either made up the claim the Kingdom of God would be fulfilled before every disciple from Jesus’ public ministry died or the actual words of Jesus dealt with an entirely different situation. One rumor among the earliest Christians was that Jesus was going to Return – have his Second Coming during some of their lifetimes. Even the Apostle Paul revealed the expectation of a speedy Return in the earliest of his New Testament Letters, First Thessalonians. However, in Paul’s later letters, he dropped the expectation Christ would Return very quickly.

Since we believe Jesus was and is the Son of God – the Crucified and Risen Christ, how are we to approach our situation of living in between his First Coming at his Birth and his Second Coming when he Returns to Usher in the Fulfilled Kingdom of God? Jesus provides us guidance and our call in **verses 34-35**, *“Be careful not to let yourselves become occupied with too much feasting and drinking and with the worries of this life, or that Day may suddenly catch you like a trap. For it will come upon all people everywhere on earth.”*

I found the following extended quotation from David Loose to be very insightful and extraordinarily relevant on the subject of how we are to live out our trusting expectation of the eventual fulfillment of the promise of Jesus’ Return. Loose’s translation of Jesus’ message is, “When people are afraid to be out during the holidays for fear of terrorist attack, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus. When we are too afraid to admit to our country those seeking a safe home for fear they may be terrorists, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus [who himself was a refugee as a child!]. When the violence of our city streets push us to abandon civil rights and protections for all people regardless of their race or ethnicity, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus.”

Loose continued, “It’s not, I think, violence that is the greatest threat to us today, but fear. Fear that drives us to forget who we are, to see people in need as the enemy, and to place securing our safety and comfort above meeting the basic needs of those in distress.” **“Fear is more dangerous than violence because fear can lead us to forget our deepest identity and betray our most cherished values.”**

Loose explained, “In this context, Jesus reminds us that he is the Lord of history and, because we trust that he will in time bring all things to a good end, we can in the meantime stand together in courage and compassion and treat all persons with the love of God we have known in him. This is the hope that is the hallmark of Christian community, the hope that rings throughout Scripture each time a biblical character sings that summary of the Gospel, ‘Do not fear.’” **“It is a message never more needed than today, when so many of our actions and decisions seem driven by fear, a lack of confidence, and an overwhelming sense of scarcity.”**

Loose concluded, “In precisely this context, our communities can be places of light and hope, courage and confidence that welcome all those struggling with fear and darkness.” **“We can remind them, in the words that come at the end of this season, that the light of Christ shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”** “We can, in other words, when we begin to grow afraid, bid each other again and again to stand up and raise our heads, confident that our redemption draws near.” (Dear Partner » Advent 1 C: “Stand Up and Raise Your Heads!” by David Loose)

Jesus gave us final instructions on the nature of our lives, as we live faithfully between his First Coming and his Second Coming in **verse 36**, *“Be on watch and pray always that you will have the strength to go safely through all those things that will happen and to stand before the Son of Man.”* Being on watch includes looking for the breaking in of God’s Kingdom and taking care to live the New Life in Christ – the life of self-giving and sacrificial agape love. Praying always is, of course, helpful with facing the specific hardships one deals with but it is also the continuing of our ongoing relationship with our Divine Parent through Jesus Christ and the nurturing and deepening of our Faith – Relationship with God. Therefore, our frequent – always praying life provides us the guidance, strength, and empowerment we need to courageously stand, raise our heads, and remain faithful in the face of all which attacks us! And so, we can trust in and truly strive for Jesus’ promise in **verse 28**, *“When these things begin to happen, stand up and raise your heads, because your salvation is near.”* Amen.