

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Second Sunday in Advent (Populus Zion) (2021)

When the Signs Appear, Lift Up Your Head

Rev. Toby Byrd

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And 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, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:25–28, ESV)

Every year before Thanksgiving we are bombarded with Christmas messages, Christmas carols in the stores, Christmas sales, and Christmas decorations everywhere. But where is Advent? Where is the patient waiting for the coming of the Messiah? Sadly, today, Advent is mostly ignored.

This is sad because we should pay attention to Advent. Advent is not just a season of the Church year; it is a promise and a warning. Advent promises our redemption as it also warns of judgment. In fact, Judgment Day is the day of Redemption for the Christian. Just as surely as our Lord Jesus Christ redeemed us by His blood at His first coming, He will judge the living and the dead at His second coming. All who have repented of their sins, who have trusted in the atoning sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on the Altar of the Cross, whose sacrificial blood washed their sins away, will be acquitted, they will be declared not guilty and resurrected to life eternal. But those who have rejected God’s grace in Christ, who have continued in their sin, they will be terrified at our Lord’s Second Advent, and their hearts will faint in fear because they shall receive judgment.

Our Lord tells us that at His second coming, *“there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves.” (v. 25)* The very powers of the heavens will be shaken. The world as we know it will be destroyed. Now this will not be a natural disaster. It will not be because of global warming. This destruction of the heavens and earth will be of God’s making. Just as He destroyed the world by the flood, and just as He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire from heaven, He will destroy the world in which we live.

Hearts attached to the cares and pleasures of this life will fail from fear. Never in a million years did the worldly believe the earth would be destroyed. They were comfortable in their own skins believing the world would last forever. If there was any thought that God would require them to face a reckoning, they foolishly thought they would have time to prepare themselves. They thought He would give them a second chance, that they might be left behind, that there would be a time for reflection, repentance, and salvation. However, the Last Day is the Last Day. Therefore, these worldly who refuse to consider the truth that they owed their Creator devotion and obedience, are fools. Rather than living for their Creator, they live worldly lives, chasing after worldly things with no consideration for their soul. To these Jesus gives warning in the words of the Gospel Reading for today, saying, *“watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.” (Luke 21:34, ESV)* The people who live as if God doesn’t matter will be in for a frightful and rude awaken on the Last Day.

Now these foolish ones aren't necessarily atheist. Many in this category do not deny God but live as if He doesn't matter. They live for the pleasure's life can give them. They seek pleasure in alcohol, drugs, and immoral sex, living for the next fix, the next drink, the next sensually, pleasurable experience. They do not live by the desires of the Spirit of God, but by the desires of the flesh, a flesh out of control, a flesh that seeks pleasure in idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, rivalries, dissension, division, all the things that seek after worldly things while opposing the Spirit of God. (Gal. 5:16-21)

Such as these have no concept of what truly matters in life. Believing that bodily comforts and pleasures are the highest priorities of life, they look and covet, while turning their back on the suffering and pain of others. God's Word does not penetrate their heart for it goes in one ear and out the other. Their religion is the culture of the world, which does not require genuine repentance or faith in the only begotten Son of God. Instead of faith in the one true God, they worship the religion of nihilism, trusting only in themselves and their moralistic, self-righteousness. If they believe in a god, it is a generic one who never condemns. Their god is a one-size-fits-all god who only loves, a god that never challenges the religious sensibilities of man or rebukes their sin. Those who worship such a god will be filled with fear when the *Signs of the Last Day* appear in the heavens. They will not lift their heads in anticipation of the resurrection, rather they will cower in fear, seeking places of refuge from the coming destruction of heaven and earth and their impending judgment before God. Such are the pretenders of Christianity, whose faith is nothing more than a will of the wisp, leading them into the swamp of false belief.

But lo and behold, Jesus returns! Our Lord's second coming is true after all. Judgment Day isn't just a scare tactic of the church to keep people in line. No, it is the certainty of holy Scripture. This theology which seemed so far away, so irrelevant, is now upon them, it is vivid and real, staring them squarely in the face. But should they have ever doubted? Did not our Lord Jesus say He would return and destroy this world? Thus, saith the Lord, that should have settled the issue.

The second coming of Christ is as certain as His first. As surely as the Christ came into this world in humility to redeem us all from sin, death, and the devil, so surely will He return in glory to judge the living and the dead. Those who have received Christ through God's gift of faith will be received by Christ when He comes again on the Last Day. Those who have not received Him will, on the Last Day, be rejected by Him.

What is freedom and salvation for some, will be terror for others. A terror unknown to mankind. A terror not from some religious ideology, but terror from our holy God, whose righteousness cannot be questioned. When the *Signs of the Last Day* appear, they will cower in fear knowing their judgment is coming and they have no defense. They will regret putting their trust in worldly things, things that perish, while rejecting heavenly things, things that will last forever. They will shudder in fear of the abiding thought of hell, knowing that God had given them every opportunity to know Him for who He truly is, a God of grace and mercy who gave His only begotten Son into death for the forgiveness of their sin. They will moan, crying out, "Why didn't I believe God when I had the chance?" But the Last Day has arrived and all of life's chances are gone.

Yes, Advent speaks to us of the second coming, the second Advent of Christ. It will indeed be a day of terror for many, but for all who found refuge in the wounds of Jesus, who took great solace in the forgiveness of their sins won by our Lord Jesus on the Altar of the Cross, it will be a day of joy, not terror. They will remember what our Lord Jesus told us about the *Signs*. He

said, ***“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*** (v. 28)

Week in and week out we attend Divine Service, hear the Gospel, receive the Lord’s Body and Blood in and under bread and wine, and are absolved by the pastor when he pronounces the forgiveness of our sins. But, to our dismay, our sins persist. They continue to return. And we cry out, “They’re not gone.” Yes, we know that Jesus is our Redeemer, we know He shed His blood for us on the cross, that through His suffering and death He paid the penalty for our sins, and we believe, but in this life, redemption cannot be seen, it must be believed, and it can only be believed through faith.

God sends us the Holy Spirit who keeps us in the faith, who keeps us from falling away. Upholding us in the grace of God, the Holy Spirit gives us confidence that the Gospel we hear, the absolution we receive, and the blessed sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion all bring us the forgiveness Christ has won for us. We believe all these things are true. But in this life, there is one thing God does not do, He does not purge us entirely of our sin. There is always the stench of our corrupted nature hanging on, leading us away from God and toward the world. It matters not how pious you are, how sanctified you believe yourself to be, or how devout you are in worship and prayer, there remains with you the corruption of sin that has taken hold of the human race ever since the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden. The theological term for this is concupiscence, this constant inclination toward evil, this sinful desire that lies within us, which breaks out in every kind of sin of thought, word, and deed. Make no mistake, concupiscence is sin. It’s not just your falling prey to sin, but it is your fleshly desire to do what God does not want you to do. That too is sin. But you say, pastor, I’m forgiven.

So which is it, are you a saint or a sinner? Well, St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Colossians, ***“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”*** (Colossians 1:13–14, *ESV*) God, for the sake of His Son Jesus, tells us our sins are forgiven.

When St. Paul says, ***“He has delivered.”*** This is a present reality. Yes, sin clings to us like Texas black dirt after a rain. It permeates our thoughts. It hounds us relentlessly distorting our affections and our love. It pollutes our desire so we cannot truthfully say our hearts are perfectly pure.

Yet, we pray, if only we could be completely delivered from sin. If only we could exist with just the purity and love of Christ within us so that all lust, selfishness, hatred, and distrust would be completely removed, and we could be a true vision of God with pure hearts and souls. What a joyous day that would be, the day of our redemption. To this, St. Paul writes, ***“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”*** (Romans 8:22–23, *ESV*)

Our desire is to be like Christ, and so we shall be on Judgment Day, on the Last Day, at the second coming of Christ. With the entire world falling apart, wars and terrorism everywhere, with financial crash and ruin, corruption of government, moral bankruptcy, faithlessness, apostasy, and every imaginable evil having sway, in these terrifying signs the redeemed shall see joy, comfort, and everlasting peace. Your faith will be vindicated, your bodies will be resurrected to a new life, a life without the corruption of the flesh, without concupiscence. You will be free from sin, death, and the devil for all eternity, living the fruit of faith, life eternal in heaven with our Savior Jesus Christ and all the saints who have gone before us. Come Lord Jesus! Let the signs show forth. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.