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Promising Signs

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Text: Luke 21:25–36 (Advent 1)

Over the last few weeks I have heard many stories about the kinds of burdens people carry in their later years of life:

- The woman looking after her ninety-year old husband whose Alzheimer's is so bad that his hands and feet have to be tied up at night so he won't wander away from home while she sleeps.
- The man who worked hard all his life, looking forward to an early and active retirement, only to have his hopes and dreams dashed by the diagnosis of terminal cancer which now restricts any plans he and his wife might want to make because of hospital tests and doctor appointments.
- The mother anxious about her daughter's physical abuse at the hands of her son-in-law, and her concern about the domestic environment in which her granddaughter is being raised.
- The men and women whose health is failing, making it hard for them to get around even in summer, who live in fear of winter's isolation.
- The wife and husband who've been told there is nothing more medical science can do for him as they wait for the inevitable.
- The European immigrant in her mid-seventies who told me that, in all her life, she has never learned what it means to have a good time.

Those are some of the life-stories I've heard recently, and I believe they can be multiplied by the number of people gathered today in this sanctuary. They are familiar, everyday sto-

ries or memories for most of us, and they describe circumstances in which you and I hope and pray we will never find ourselves.

Yet I suspect that most of us accept the possibility that we will, one day, find ourselves living in similarly tragic circumstances. Like the signs in the sun and moon and stars to which Jesus points in today's Gospel, the signs of death and decay are plain to see all around us—and they have the same impact Jesus describes: "... on the earth *distress* among nations *confused* by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from *fear* and *foreboding* of what is coming upon the world..."

Distress, confusion, fear and foreboding are very personal feelings. They are how you and I feel about things that threaten us personally—and nothing threatens us more personally than death! Ultimately, death is what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel. The Son of Man's coming at the end of history raises the theme of judgment, and in the Bible—if not in our contemporary thinking—death and judgment are closely connected. For example, Hebrews 9:27 says, "... it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment." And the writer goes on to speak about the second coming of Jesus Christ, which is the church's focus on this first Sunday in Advent: "... so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time... to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:28, NRSV).

Whether our own personal history will end in death or in the second advent of Jesus Christ, the signs of illness, aging and despair all of us know, or the kinds of natural disasters to which Jesus points as signs of the end, *all* these signs agree on one thing: life, as you and I know it, will not always be the way you and I know it today. The Apostle Paul summarizes the message of Advent like this, in 1 Corinthians 7:31, "... the present form of this world is passing away."

There isn't much that upsets us more than undesired change—and it's hard to imagine a more drastic change than the passing from life to death or from this world to another. I suppose that's why we feel more comfortable with things as they are or have always been, than with new things. We tend to look at change as the agent of death and, therefore, in order to preserve our life as it is we expend enormous amounts of energy resisting change. It's what Jesus calls being "weighed

down... with the worries of this life” which can leave us unprepared to face our final day of ultimate change. In spite of the energy we waste worrying about it or trying to escape it through dissipation—which is another word for the pleasure-seeking our Hymn of the Day [“The Day Is Surely Drawing Near”, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, #321] calls “idle mirth”—or in spite of attempting to escape the reality of death through drunkenness, or any harmful addiction, that final day of ultimate change, according to Jesus, “... will come upon all who live on the face of the earth”—even upon you and me!

But Jesus welcomes that final day of death and judgment as a day of life and hope! And he encourages us to welcome it in the same way. Consider the parable he tells in today’s Gospel: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near.”

It’s difficult to imagine the shock his disciples must have felt as they listened. In the middle of teaching them about the approaching day of death and judgment, the end of history and the fear that comes with it, Jesus tells a parable about new life beginning! *Winter* is the season of darkness, decay and death. So it would have made more sense to the disciples if Jesus had illustrated his point by saying, “... as soon as trees lose their leaves, it’s a sure sign that *winter* is near.” Instead Jesus connected the signs of the end with the renewed beginning of spring which promises the full, new life of summer!

No matter how far away it seems today, the day of darkness, death and judgment will come upon us all. But Jesus brings us the good news that *when* it comes upon us we still have the promise of life to look forward to: “Now when you see these things begin to take place”—the death of parents and grandparents, our own wrinkles, graying or thinning hair and failing health—“stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is near.”

That is the hope and promise of Advent. The promise that in Jesus Christ God comes to us in our weakness, darkness and, finally, in our death, bringing the hope of eternal life in God’s kingdom.