

*Sermon: "In the 'In-Between' Time"*\*

*Jeremiah 33: 14–16; Luke 21: 25–38*

*St. James Presbyterian Church, November 28, 2021*

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This morning's reading from Luke's Gospel is perhaps not how we had hoped to begin Advent. All around us the greenery is going up and the lights are twinkling; store sound-systems and street loud-speakers all around the city are pumping Christmas carols into the air — or if not Christmas carols, then Holiday carols. We might wish to have permission today to get ready not just for Christmas but for the Baby Jesus. We want to listen to the Angel Gabriel announce the strange news to Mary, and to hear her magnify the Lord. We want to walk beside Mary and Joseph as they travel to Bethlehem. We want to prepare room for Jesus, if only in a stable, and to make ready a cradle for him, if only a manger filled with hay. Those are the stories with which Luke's Gospel begins; so this morning's reading seems a long way away. And indeed it really is a long way away, for it comes from the very end of Jesus' ministry, just before the arrest, the trial, the cross. In between these two moments lies Jesus's entire ministry, and at the end of today's passage we see Jesus at work, teaching and praying, right to the very end.

But his words here point beyond the time of Jesus to the unfolding of God's plan for humanity as it is worked out over time itself, and across the universe. Scholars think that Luke included these words because of the situation of Jesus's followers in the decades after Christ's death and resurrection. These early Christians were beset and persecuted, and their situation was often dire. But these apocalyptic words of Jesus reassure his followers, even in difficult times, that God is in control, and that one day, God willing, they will stand before the Son of Man. They are living

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\* This sermon text is provided as a help to listeners with hearing or language difficulties, as well as others who are interested. It is not intended as a fully-documented publication — and it may differ from the sermon as preached.

between the promise and its fulfillment. They are living in the “in-between time.”

And that’s where we are living too. For the world around us is still a troubled and suffering place. Our world is not short on disasters, as one commentator notes: we have seen “distress among nations” in “wars and political tumult”; large-scale “climate catastrophe” could be read as Luke’s “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars”; and we have been made “breathless from fear and foreboding” as we confront a “global pandemic,” while societal upheavals ranging from inflation to racism “weigh down our hearts.” Perhaps we can relate to Luke’s apocalyptic imagery after all.

It is all too easy for our hearts on the one hand to be weighed down; and on the other to be caught up in the distractions that our bright bauble of a world offers us. And yet, even in this “in-between time,” when bright young people are gunned down in cafés and restaurants and concert halls, when bombs rain from the skies, when cities and towns are reduced to rubble, when refugees stream across the face of the earth in their thousands and hundreds of thousands and millions, even in this beset and turbulent “in-between-time,” we are called to live our lives as Christians — as people who follow Christ, who welcome Christ, who trust in Christ, and who live by Christ.

For the American theologian David Lose, “the most stunning part” of our reading from Luke is “when Jesus says this: ‘Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’” “How can Jesus assert that ominous and foreboding events are actually signs of our redemption?,” Lose asks. It is because, he thinks, that “according to Luke and other early Christian theologians, we live and work, love and struggle between the two great poles of God’s intervention in the world: the coming of Christ in the flesh in order to triumph over death through his cross and resurrection . . . and the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time and his triumph over all

the powers of earth and heaven. This 'in-between time,' though fraught with tension, is nevertheless also characterized by hope and courage because we know that the end of this story, while not yet here, has been written by the resurrected Christ."

And this, says Lose, is something that we can translate into our own circumstances: "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 pushes 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."

For the coming of Jesus into the world at Christmas is a story that is full of signs. The appearance of John the Baptist is a sign that the Messiah is soon to come into the world; the shepherds and the magi, the manger and the star are signs that the infant that Mary bears is God breaking decisively into our world. The birth of Jesus is a sign of the totality of his life — his ministry among the poor, the afflicted, and the confused; his suffering and death on the cross; and even his rising again from death. And this life too is a sign — a sign that God is moving in our world to restore justice and to redeem the oppressed. The story of Christmas doesn't end with Jesus; it goes on. The leaves have appeared on the fig tree; and the Lord continues to work his purposes out.

"The message of the pericope is simply this," writes one scholar: "a transformative chain of events was launched at the announcement of the coming of the infant, God-incarnate, the strangeness and peculiarity of which can be proclaimed only with the help of this frightening apocalyptic

imagery." In our own lives, among our troubles and distractions, it can be hard to remember that God is still at work. So it is good to be reminded: "things in our world are not necessarily as they appear to be." In this time of Advent, as we consider the plight of just one more teenage girl and one seemingly ordinary pregnancy, it is good to remember: things are not always as they appear to be.

In the season of Advent, we turn to the beginning of the story of Jesus Christ with hope and delight, to remind ourselves of the light and hope that came into the world with Jesus. "The light of Christ shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Whatever happens in the world around us, whatever happens in our own lives, however pervasive and impenetrable the darkness seems, the light of Christ endures. It lights the way through "the in-between-time," encouraging us not to fear but to trust in God, writes David Lose. It illuminates the practices of our Christian community, so that we might ourselves become "places of light and hope, courage and confidence that welcome all those struggling with fear and darkness." And it shines in our hearts and our faces when, in those times "when we begin to grow afraid, [we] bid each other again and again to stand up and raise our heads, confident that our redemption draws near."

May this season of Advent be for you a season of blessing, of blessing indeed.

Amen.