

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

December 1, 2024 (1st Sunday in Advent, Year C)
Luke 21:25-36

The scripture readings you've just heard may have taken you by surprise. You're thinking about CHRISTMAS.

You can't HELP it; after all, you've just survived the BIGGEST SHOPPING weekend of the year. It seems like EVERY year they say it was the biggest shopping day EVER. And the REASON, advertisers say, was to give us an early start on CHRISTMAS.

The radio is playing Christmas music, some of them non-stop. Many of us have already put up our Christmas lights, and the most ORGANIZED of us have already started addressing envelopes for our Christmas CARDS.

Then, when you come to church today, you hear such UN-CHRISTMAS-LIKE words as these: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars ... People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." "Be on guard," lest "that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap."

Don't doesn't sound like CHRISTMAS at ALL. You may wonder if your JANUARY CREDIT card bill might catch you like a trap, but this scripture sounds a WHOLE lot more SERIOUS than a bill.

So, JUST when we're (sing) "beginning to feel a lot like CHRISTMAS," what kind of scripture reading is THIS? It's a scripture for ADVENT.

But it's been a YEAR since we last CELEBRATED Advent, so let me REMINDE you what Advent MEANS. Advent is the FIRST season in our church year. It includes the 4 Sundays BEFORE Christmas. The word "Advent" MEANS "coming." But, in truth, it means TWO comings, because Advent reminds us of Jesus' FIRST coming, to Bethlehem over 2000 years ago, and his SECOND coming, which we STILL await, when Christ "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." It's a season of PREPARATION, for both the celebration of Christmas, AND the RETURN our Lord.

But every year, the WORLD tries to hold Christmas HOSTAGE. With all of its gadgets and this year's MUST-HAVE toys, the world tries to make DEMANDS and HOLD Christmas for RANSOM.

It's time for the Church to take Christmas BACK. And that's what we DO in ADVENT. EVERY year, we bring BACK the MEANING and the PURPOSE of Christmas. The birth of the Christ-child is TOO POWERFUL, even for Wal-Mart and Amazon. The sights and the sounds of the REMEMBRANCE of this Christ-child, born for us, changes all the RULES. His PRESENCE makes the glitter of OUR Christmas presents PALE in comparison.

But, according to Jesus in our gospel reading, we have a much GREATER problem than CHRISTMAS being held hostage. WE, OURSELVES are in bondage to sin and death. Our hearts are weighed down with the WORRIES of this LIFE, or with our own PLEASURES.

It's like a trap, Jesus says. A trap only works when the victim doesn't EXPECT anything. And we don't EXPECT JESUS. We don't expect anything DIFFERENT to happen. We're not LOOKING for Jesus. Having our minds dulled by excessive worrying or the pleasures of this world is like a TRAP that KEEPS us from seeing the SIGNS of JESUS COMING.

So, Jesus goes ahead and TELLS us what his coming will mean. He says that SOME people "will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world." But not for CHRISTIANS; not for BELIEVERS. Christians are to "STAND up and RAISE your heads, because your REDEMPTION is drawing near."

He says we are REDEEMED. Now, unless we're talking about COUPONS, "REDEEMED" isn't a word we HEAR that often, outside of CHURCH, but in the GOSPELS, "redeemed" ALWAYS has the idea of releasing or freeing someone by the payment of a ransom. We are FREE, because JESUS paid the PRICE for our freedom.

There once was a man named George Thomas, who was a pastor in a small New England town. One Sunday morning he came to the Church carrying an old, rusty, bent bird cage, and set it on the pulpit.

Eyebrows were raised as Pastor Thomas began to speak. He said that he had been walking through town the day before, when he saw a young boy coming toward him SWINGING this bird cage. On the bottom of the cage were three little wild birds, shivering with cold and fright. He stopped the boy and asked, "What you got there, son?"

"Just some old birds," came the reply.

"What are you gonna do with them?" He asked.

"Take 'em home and have FUN with 'em," he answered. "I'm gonna tease 'em and pull out their feathers and make 'em fight. I'm gonna have a REAL good time."

"But you'll get tired of those birds sooner or later. What will you do then?"

"Oh, I got some cats," said the little boy. "They like birds. I'll give 'em to them."

The pastor was silent for a moment. "How much do you WANT for those birds, son?"

"Huh??!!! Why, you don't want THEM birds, mister. They're just plain old FIELD birds. They don't SING -- they ain't even PRETTY!"

"How much?" the pastor asked again.

The boy sized up the pastor as if he were CRAZY and said, "10 bucks."

The pastor reached into his wallet and took out a ten dollar bill. He placed it in the boy's hand, and, in a flash, the boy was gone.

The pastor picked up the cage and GENTLY carried it to the end of the alley where there was a tree and a grassy spot. Setting the cage down, he opened the door, and by softly tapping the bars persuaded the birds out, and set them free.

Well, that explained the empty bird cage on the PULPIT, but it didn't explain why the pastor had BROUGHT it to the pulpit. And then the pastor explained.

He said, one day Satan and Jesus were talking. Satan had just come from the Garden of Eden, and he was gloating and boasting.

"Yes, sir, I just caught the whole WORLD of people down there. Set me a trap, used bait I knew they couldn't resist. Got 'em all!"

"What are you going to do with them?" Jesus asked.

Satan replied, "I'm gonna teach them how to hate and abuse each other, how to drink and hurt people. I'm gonna teach them how to fight and KILL each other. Oh, I'm REALLY gonna have fun!"

"And what will you do when you get done with them?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, I'm gonna kill 'em," Satan blared proudly.

"How much do you want for them?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, you don't WANT THOSE people. They ain't no GOOD. Why, they'll just HATE you. They'll SPIT on you, curse you and KILL you!! You don't want THOSE people!!"

"How much?" Jesus asked again.

Satan looked at Jesus and SNEERED, "All your tears, and all your blood."

"DONE!" Jesus said, and then He paid the price.

The pastor picked up the cage, opened its door, and just stepped down from the pulpit.

This is Advent. And the MESSAGE of these times is the SONG of those wild birds. "He paid the price. We're FREE. We're REDEEMED." It's the song sung in EVERY CAROL this season. It's the MEANING behind every GIFT under every TREE. It's the STAR the Wisemen followed. It's the WORD the shepherds heard. It's the ASSURANCE Mary received: REDEEMED! You and I have been trapped by sin, but Christ has paid the price.

This is the season of Advent, and Advent is all about HOPE. The one who came as a child to redeem us, to set us FREE from Satan's CAGE, will come AGAIN to make sure that NO one is EVER trapped again.

So HAPPY ADVENT. We can WAIT for CHRISTMAS. Amen.