

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Advent 1
December 2, 2018

NOW IS THE TIME FOR PRAYER
Luke 21:25-36

I want to warn you. Today is the first Sunday in Advent! Some of you may think such an announcement sounds quite innocent and you say, “So what?” Others of you, realizing this means Christmas is just around the corner, may be wondering how you will get everything done in time.

But I really do need to warn you, because Advent is perhaps the most dangerous time of the year. Of all the seasons of the year, this season has the most potential for harm. Of all the months, December is the most perilous. Believe me, these are dangerous times. And the danger is this, that we lose our souls.

You may wonder why Advent is such a dangerous time. Isn't this a holy time of the year? Isn't this a time to get ready for the holidays? Isn't this a time to prepare for the celebration of our Lord's birth? And you are right, it is. Children, all across the world are rehearsing for their Christmas program. Walk through the stores and you hear Christmas music. Christmas lights are beginning to appear in yards around town. The signs are clear, the holy season of Christmas is near.

And yet this is precisely why these are such dangerous days. I've seen it year after year. The stress level escalates in December. Exhaustion sets in. Tempers flare. Depression gains an upper hand. And these are just the outward signs. The real danger lurks deep within. As Jesus said, we gain the world, but we lose our souls.

Does our Lord have a word to help us through dangerous times? Take a look at the Scripture readings for today. The Scripture readings, however, are not what we might expect. In fact, throughout the Advent season the Scripture readings are surprising, even shocking. They are not about Christmas. They are not warm and fuzzy. Rather, they are like Chicago in December – windy and boisterous, dark and cold. Here and there are glimpses of warm sunshine. But only glimpses, just enough to fuel our hope that there is light above the clouds and warmth beyond the cold.

In the Gospel reading for this first week in Advent, Jesus speaks of signs that the world is coming unglued. Listen, as I read from the Good News Version of the Bible. *“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.”*

What do you do when you feel life is coming unglued? What do you do when nothing seems sure and certain? What do you do when an election doesn't turn out the way you want it to? What do you do when Christmas comes bearing down on you with a heavy hand – “do this,” “buy more,” “be happy,” “get in the holiday spirit.” What do you do? You may want to run and hide.

What does Jesus say? Listen, “*When these things begin to happen, stand up and raise your heads, because your salvation is near.*” There is hope. There is something sure and certain. “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*” Do you get it? What you really need is Jesus Christ. The more threatening the world appears, the more you need Jesus. The more uncertain life is, the more you need Jesus. The more hectic the days become, the more you need Jesus. There is hope in Jesus Christ because he is sure and certain.

Listen to Jesus! “*Be careful not to let yourselves become occupied with too much feasting and strong drink and with worries of this life, or that Day may suddenly catch you like a trap.*” Sounds like December in Chicago, doesn't it? The danger in Advent is that we fill our lives with the wrong things and lose our souls. And even when we know we are doing it, we think we are doing it for the right reason. We excuse our busyness, thinking we are preparing for the Lord's birth. We rationalize our craziness, thinking it will get us ready for Christmas.

Jesus offers a better plan. *“Be on watch and pray always that you will have the strength to go safely through all these things that will happen.”* Watch and pray, says Jesus. If the cold and dark days of December endanger your soul, then spend your days in prayer. If the holiday rush threatens to do you in, then devote more time to prayer. If you don’t want Advent to be a time of exhaustion and despair, but rather a time of hope and promise, then prayer must be at the top of your Advent agenda.

But please, do not look upon prayer as yet another task to add to your long list of things to do. Jesus doesn’t tell you to pray because he thinks you are bored and need something to do. Prayer is the way Jesus wants to help you. Notice the promise he attaches to prayer. Prayer will give you the strength to go safely through all the things that will happen. And prayer will do so because prayer is your life-line. Prayer connects you to Jesus Christ, the One who has come to rescue you, the One who is your Savior.

Today we light one candle on the Advent wreath. Next Sunday we light two candles. On the third Sunday in Advent we light three candles. And the fourth week we light four candles. Let the candles on the Advent wreath remind you that Advent is a time of prayer. This week spend one hour in prayer. Next week two hours a day. The third week three hours. And the fourth week four hours.

If that is not possible, then make it 30 minutes a day or 15 minutes a day. Each week, though, increase the time you spend in prayer.

The color blue and the Advent wreath both remind us that we are waiting for the fulfillment of promises, waiting for the birth, waiting for the Lord, waiting for the reign of God to break in again and again. Advent is thus not a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a time of waiting and praying and preparing for Christ to come in an ever new and ever more powerful way into our lives and into our world. Advent is a time to wait and pray.

Advent need not be time when you lose your soul. Advent can be a time when your soul is strengthened and enriched. Watch and pray, says Jesus. That's how you can make it safely through these or any dangerous days. Watch and pray!