

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Luke 21:25-36

*<sup>25</sup> There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup> People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*

*<sup>29</sup> Then he told them a parable: Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup> as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. <sup>33</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

*<sup>34</sup> Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, <sup>35</sup> like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of Man.*

A senior angel is showing a very young angel around the splendors of the universe. They view whirling galaxies and blazing suns, and then flit across infinite distances of space until at last they enter one particular galaxy of 500 billion stars.

As the two of them draw near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

"I want you to watch that one particularly," said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

"Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me," said the little angel. "What's special about that one?"

To the little angel, earth did not seem so impressive. He listened in stunned disbelief as the senior angel told him that this planet, small and insignificant and not overly clean, was the renowned Visited Planet.

"Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince, went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should He do a thing like that?"

The little angel's face wrinkled in disgust. "Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?"

"I do, and I don't think He would like you to call them 'creeping, crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him."

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.

Yes, it's that time of year again, the Advent season, a time of preparation for Christmas, the day that we remember and celebrate that God sent his only Son, Jesus, to the earth because He loves us, and for the purpose of saving us.

The holiday decorations are being put up. Christmas programs are on the television, as well as the Christmas commercials. Christmas music rings out on our radios, and carolers sing

the happy season melodies for us. People are busy in their kitchens baking cookies; and they are searching online or in stores to find the perfect gifts for friends and family members, then wrapping their treasures and putting them under their Christmas tree.

While most people feel excited and happy around the Christmas season, there are many others who are not feeling the same emotional high. The loss of loved ones, economic struggles, broken relationships, illness, national and international turmoil create fear, anxiety, and deep sadness, threatening or robbing them of joy. The joy of the season for these broken souls only serves to accentuate a feeling of hopelessness in their lives.

However Jesus came to bring hope to all, and we remember this today, the first Sunday of Advent. This is the season of hope, and nothing, nor anyone can give us more hope than the gift of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

He's the Savior who came to save us from ourselves, a Savior who came to set us free from our sin, a Savior who opened the door that leads us to God. He came so that we can know God personally. We can take our joy and pain to God personally, knowing that God is with us and walking with us through the dark times, and will heal us, setting us free from the darkness.

But Advent also should remind us of another promise, a promise that Christ made to us, the promise of his return one day. Today's scripture reading from close to the end of Luke, near the end of Jesus' life instead at the beginning of Luke where we read the wonderful Christmas story about his coming to the world as a precious tiny baby, points us in the direction of remembering the promise that Jesus will return.

Before Jesus was born the Israelites waited for the arrival of a prophesied, promised Messiah, but they did not know when he would come. He would come and save them from their suffering. They wanted him to come soon because the world as they knew it was a mess. The scripture promises us that Jesus will come again and take us to a better place; but we don't know when he will come. Scripture tells us that there will be those who will predict his return, but they will be wrong. Only God knows when Christ will return. In today's scripture reading, it sounds like the people in that day should expect Christ to return in their lifetime, but that did not happen.

People throughout the time since Jesus' resurrection have insisted that they know when he will return. They point to the book of Revelations to justify their predictions, claiming that certain signs mentioned in that text are taking place right now. That has been claimed at different times for centuries now. I had a youth pastor who had Christian relatives in Russia before coming to the US, who were convinced by their pastor that he knew when Jesus was returning. They followed him to a particular high place in the countryside and waited for Jesus to return on the day their pastor predicted, but Jesus did not return on that day.

We do not know when Jesus will return, nor should we waste our time trying to interpret the book of Revelations as a code book of clues revealing when Jesus will return. I can sum the whole book of Revelations and this discussion about Christ's return in two words, "Be ready!" Yes, just be ready. If we are ready for Christ's return, we shouldn't need all the pieces of the puzzle put together about his return. We don't need them.

Quite frankly, we should be living our lives always as if we are ready for his return because he might just come for us when we individually make the journey from this life into eternity today or tomorrow or whenever. We will meet him face to face one way or another, so we need to always be ready, always waiting with anticipation, always living in a season of advent.

The waiting will not always be easy, but we have the promise from Jesus, that God is with us always. Although wars will continue, poverty will rise and people will die of starvation,

children will be neglected and abandoned, people will die of cancer and aids, marriages will fall apart, violence will occur in our cities, towns and even our homes, natural disasters will destroy people's homes and lives, people will over indulge in alcohol and drugs, even though all of this and more will continue to go on around us and possibly to us, God is with us, God wants to be with us, and trusting this gives us hope for the promised better day when Christ returns.

(Contributed by Michael McCartney)

Imagine one day that you receive this email:

*Greetings, As you well know, we are getting closer to my birthday. Every year there is a celebration in my honor, and I think that this year the celebration will be repeated. During this time there are many people shopping for gifts, and there are many radio announcements, TV commercials, and in every part of the world everyone is saying that my birthday is getting closer and closer. It is really very nice to know that at least once a year, some people think of me.*

*As you know, the celebration of my birthday began many years ago. At first people seemed to understand and be thankful for all that I did for them, but now in these times, no one seems to know the reason for the celebration. Family and friends get together and have a lot of fun, but they don't seem to know the meaning of the celebration.*

*I remember that last year there was a great feast in my honor. The dinner table was full of delicious foods, pastries, fruits, assorted nuts, and chocolates.*

*The decorations were exquisite and there were many, many beautifully wrapped gifts. But do you want to know something? I wasn't invited. I was the guest of honor, and they didn't remember to send me an invitation. The party was for me, but when that great day came, I was left outside. They closed the door in my face, and I wanted to be with them and share their table. In truth though, that didn't really surprise me that much because in the last few years it seems all are closing their doors to me.*

*Since I was not invited, I decided to enter the party without making any noise.*

*I went in and stood in a corner. They were all drinking; there were some who were drunk and telling jokes and laughing at everything. They were having a great time. To top it all, this big fat man all dressed in red wearing a long white beard entered the room yelling Ho-Ho-Ho! He seemed drunk. He sat on the sofa and all the children ran to him, shouting: "Santa Claus, Santa Claus," as if the party were in his honor!*

*At 12 midnight all the people began to hug each other; I extended my arms waiting for someone to hug me and, do you know, no one hugged me.*

*Suddenly they all began to share gifts. They opened them one by one with great expectation. When all had been opened, I looked to see if, maybe, there was one for me.*

*What would you feel like if on your birthday everybody shared gifts, and you did not get one? I then understood that I was unwanted at that party and quietly left.*

*Every year it gets worse. People only remember to eat and drink, the gifts, the parties but nobody remembers me. I would like this Christmas that you allow me to enter into your life. I would like you to recognize the fact that almost two thousand years ago I came into this world to give my life for you, on the cross, to save you. Today, I only want you to believe this with all your heart.*

*I want to share something with you. As many didn't invite me to their party, I will have my own celebration, a grandiose party that no one has ever imagined, a spectacular party. I'm still making the final arrangements. Today I am sending out many invitations and there is an invitation for you. I want to know if you wish to attend, and I will make a reservation for you and*

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*write your name with golden letters in my great guest book. Only those on the guest list will be let into the party. Those who don't answer the invitation will be left outside.*

*Do you know how you can answer this invitation? It is by extending it to others whom you care for.*

*I'll be waiting for all of you to attend my party this year.*

*See you soon, I love you!*

*-Jesus-*

During this season of advent as we prepare to celebrate the arrival of the Christ child all those years ago, may we also be reminded that someday a Savior will return again for us.

"However chaotic and uncertain our world is, Jesus promises a day when his return will bring about lasting salvation, justice, redemption and healing." ("Working Preacher" by Troy Troftgruben).

May this reminder fill us with hope for the future, and when he does return, whenever that day comes, I pray we will all be ready. Amen.