

Sermon – Luke 21:25-36
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Grace Lutheran Church
1 Advent – Year C
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“Ready or Not”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Over the long Thanksgiving weekend, our family made several trips to the Indiana Dunes; it’s always nice to get away for a moment to relax. The highways from here to there are, of course, lined with signs. Since the signs blocked out any natural beauty we might have seen along the way, the kids noticed them. Hungry for a burger, one child told me he’d just look for the signs, meaning those blue ones that inform you which restaurants and services are available at the upcoming exit. Wendy’s was the winner, if you’re curious. The same child later asked me why so many lawyers had billboards along the highway; I silently wondered how those lawyers decided which of them got to use “The Hammer” as a nickname. Yes, signs as far as the eye could see. We’ve noticed other signs this week, too. We saw a sign of brokenness and violence last Sunday when an SUV was driven through the barricades of the Waukesha Christmas parade, its driver seemingly unconcerned about the six lives he would take and the dozens of other people he would hurt. We saw a sign of anxiety emerge this week with the announcement that a new COVID variant, Omicron, has been discovered in South Africa and has already made its way to Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. And we saw a welcome sign of justice with the verdicts handed down in the Ahmaud Arbery murder trial, which, while hopeful, was also a sign of our sorrow at living in a world where such senseless killings happen in the first place. The signs indeed are all around us. What do they mean?

2. Jesus, speaking in Jerusalem shortly before his betrayal and death, gives his disciples an apocalyptic vision; he gives us our third consecutive Sunday of apocalyptic readings. He tells us of signs in the heavens and distress upon the earth. These signs, like the signs of our own world, stir up fainting, fear, and foreboding. We look around and see that the signs of the time, signs of doom that block out beauty. But Jesus' vision seems more troubling still, for it indicates the turning of the ages. The Son of Man is coming in the clouds. Jesus speaks not of his first appearance as the baby of Bethlehem but of his return, the cosmic Christ returning in judgment and glory. It is enough to put the kingdoms of this world on notice. Creation itself is breaking open. And what does Jesus say we should do when this time comes? Fear, cower, grovel? No. Stand up, he says. Raise your heads. Your redemption is drawing near. Just when things look their worst, a righteous branch shall spring up. David's broken royal line shall be renewed, and peace shall break upon the earth as Jeremiah's vision is fulfilled.
3. Jesus, speaking of his return, tells us to remain constantly vigilant, alert to signs of his return, while simultaneously not worrying a thing about it. After all, the signs *always* seem to be pointing to the end of the world. Things are always falling apart. But everyone who has predicted the end of the world has been wrong so far; while Jesus may return in glory this afternoon, it's just as likely he won't. The signs keep appearing, but not only those pointing to the end. There are middle signs, too. Look at the fig tree which, season after season, announces the coming of summer. So, too, do you know that the Kingdom of God is near during challenge and distress. Jesus certainly means that the coming of the Kingdom in its fulness is near, but I think he also means that the Kingdom of God is near to us now. It beckons, calls, invites us to live in the hope of the new world that will one day dawn even as we continue here, now. This is more than simply enduring the present in the hope of a better future. It is the future breaking into the now. The church

father Tertullian writes that “already heavenly things are taking the place of earthly, and great things of small, and eternal things of things that fade away. What room is there here for anxiety and solicitude?” Jesus tells us that everything will pass away, but his words will not. The words of this Word-made-flesh speak peace, comfort, calm in a world that is anything but.

4. As we enter Advent today, we may be tempted to simply prepare to celebrate Christmas. Don't get me wrong! There's nothing wrong with preparing for Christmas, nothing necessarily the matter with holiday busyness. We unboxed our decorations yesterday and are going tree hunting today. But today, Jesus reminds us that he cannot be domesticated; that he has power over heaven and earth, that he is coming back. As these days of December will surely start to fly by, so shall the day of his appearing burst upon us. We might as well be looking out for him! Not because we'll miss out on his return, but because we might miss the signs of his presence in the meantime, might miss the opportunity to be signs of his presence for others. Advent is a time to cultivate longing, to learn to watch. We are Advent people, always waiting but never without hope. The Lutheran pastor Heidi Neumark writes, “Probably the reason I love Advent so much is that it is a reflection of how I feel most of the time. I might not feel sorry during Lent, when the liturgical calendar begs repentance. I might not feel victorious, even though it is Easter morning. I might not feel full of the Spirit, even though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent, I am always in sync with the season.” She continues on the theme of longing: “Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry . . . bursts forth: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!”
5. The signs all around us make us feel as if the world is falling apart. Of course, in a great many ways *it is* falling apart. But the day is surely coming when Christ, crucified but now raised, shall return in glory. If day is coming, that must mean night is ending. And is the daily-breaking dawn not sign enough

for us? Is that not enough to point us back to God, to stir up our hearts in longing for Christ? The poet Mary Oliver asks, “Why do people keep asking to see / God’s identity papers / when the darkness opening into morning / is more than enough?”

6. Yes, Advent is upon us, and surely the days will pass their way to Christmas, whether we get all the shopping and cooking done or not. Even more surely, the day of the Lord is coming, and creation will quail before him. Just here is our hope, that neither this creation nor any power that dwells therein, neither earth nor heaven, not the sin or worry or fear or hate that dwell in our hearts will be able to refuse or resist him. So why refuse or resist him now? Christ who will bring this old world to its end in favor of the new world that will one day dawn, calls to us in *this* world. The Lord, Paul tells us, desires that we would increase and abound in love for one another and for all. After all, we have nothing to fear from this world’s end. We are baptized into Christ. When he returns, we will know the voice of the One whose words will never pass away. We will raise up our heads, hopes fulfilled. So let our concern be for this world, and for those who live here. Perhaps you remember that the world was about to end nine years ago. Or at least that’s what some people thought because the Mayan calendar was coming to an end. In the days leading up to the world *not* ending, a photo made its way around the internet. The picture was of a handwritten sign affixed to a chain-link fence. Translated from Spanish into English, it read: “I am not afraid that the world will end in 2012. I am afraid that it will stay the same.” In that spirit, while we await heaven’s joys, we pray that the Kingdom would come from heaven to earth, even now, with God’s reign of righteousness.
7. Friends, Jesus is coming. Be alert! Keep watch! This child of Mary, whose Incarnation and birth we prepare to celebrate, is the One coming in the clouds with power and might. We need not live in fear or give into worry. The signs are clear. In water he has cleansed us; in Word, called us; in bread and

wine, fed us. Our future is certain; our hope is secure. May we look for Christ in his return and in his presence even now. May we look for ways to make Christ manifest for the sake of others. As we wait for the dawn may we light up the darkness with the light of Christ. Stirred up, may our hearts cry out: Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.