

Redemption is Near

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Luke 21: 25-36

And so it begins.

The season when the most often asked question is: “Are you ready, yet?” We all know what it means. It means, of course, especially this early in the season, have you finished your Christmas shopping? And, as we move closer to Christmas, it will take on a few more layers of meaning, such as: Do you have your tree up? Have you hung the lights yet? Have you done your baking of cookies and other Christmas goodies? Do you have your menu and your plans set for Christmas day? There's so much to do!

Is it any wonder that by the time evening rolls around on Christmas Day, maybe especially for those who put their trees up on Thanksgiving night, and braved the crowds and parking lots of Black Friday, for many of us we're done? Ready to declare Christmas over, for better or for worse, as the season that the Church has celebrated for hundreds of years (the twelve days of Christmas) is just beginning. Christmas Day is, of course, the *first* day of Christmas. But, for many of us, we've had enough by then.

It's unfortunate, but it may actually be a very healthy instinct in us at that point. It may be an instinct for quiet again, a longing for our lives not to feel hurried or pushed, a need to feel centered in ourselves again. It's easy to get lost in the hustle and bustle, isn't it? It's easy to lose sight of what it is that we are most deeply waiting for, hoping for in our lives and in our world. And in that sense, the actual way we live our lives in this season leading up to Christmas could be a pretty good metaphor for what's missing in our lives in general. They can become overrun with worries, too much about getting and spending, too much about the fears fueled by all the events of the world that are on the TV news every day. Not that all of that doesn't matter. It all matters a lot. But, in the midst of it all, it's easy to lose sight of the One whose truth we await and long to see revealed in our hearts and lives and world. It's easy to miss God. If we think about God at all, we may be tempted to think God's not really present at all day to day, but removed in heaven somewhere, waiting to act in some cataclysmic way perhaps, when things get bad enough.

Jesus was concerned about that, about how easy it might be to miss God in their midst, when he spoke with the disciples about the terrible things that he saw coming in his world. He saw that things were going to get worse before they got better in and around Jerusalem. He spoke of wars, and earthquakes, the destruction of the temple, and that the disciples themselves would probably face persecution. And he knew that in the midst of all of that, it would be very easy for them to lose track of what his life and ministry were all about, the inauguration of the kingdom of God, the ways in which it was breaking in already, the ways in which he had taught them to look for it and see it even now, so that they might re-orient their lives.

So, he sought to reassure them, first of all by telling them that all this distress, would be terribly distressing to God too. The very “powers of the heavens will be shaken” by it, he says. In one sense, that may be alarming to us. Maybe we don't like to think that God can be shaken. As scary as a God of wrath might be, there's a sense in which we prefer such a one. We prefer a God who's doing the shaking rather than One who can be shaken. But, on the other hand, I think it is reassuring to know that all this distress and suffering going on in and around us, distresses God too, that God suffers it as well. Because, it's Jesus' faith that it's because of that nature of God, that when all those distressing things are happening, God draws near with redemption. “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” They are strong words of hope because Jesus knew it would be easy for them to lose track of what his life and ministry were all about.

It's easy to get lost. And in this season, you and I know just how easy. It's interesting that Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, translates that verse about not getting weighed down with “dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life”, as not getting weighed down with too many parties, drinking too much, and *shopping*. Just the things we'll be doing. And there's a fine line, isn't there. I mean, as the days get shorter and shorter, and the darkness and cold envelopes us we probably need to find ways to celebrate and bring some light and warmth to our days. And I think Jesus would affirm that. At the same time, he'd have us remember just what the nature of the true light of life, the true light of the world is. So that we don't get lost.

So that, Christmas day, when we are celebrating the fullness of the God of love among us in flesh, doesn't catch us like a trap, and we find ourselves in mid-afternoon amidst all the scraps of wrapping paper, and gifts stacked around feeling strangely empty. And we will have missed the ways Christ was there among us. Amidst all the events and worries of our life, much less of the world, it's easy to lose track of what it is for which we are most deeply waiting and hoping. Jesus would assure us, as he does his disciples in this text, that amidst all of that God is faithful, God surely comes still, we just have to be alert, praying and watching, because it's in quiet, unobtrusive ways. Like in a baby, born to peasant parents out in a stable in the dark of night. Or, like how a “fig tree and all the trees” sprout leaves and you know that summer is near.

That's how you see God. God is as faithful as a fig tree in the spring. Bringing summer. Bringing ripeness and fullness and light to life. When the pressures of the season are starting to overwhelm you, when the expectations of it are too much, when life just feels like too much, says Jesus: “stand up and raise your heads, ... your redemption is drawing near.” God is as faithful as a fig tree in spring. In Alaska there is a weed called Fireweed. It's named that, maybe because of its bright, deep pink blossoms. Or, maybe it's named that because it appears there whenever and wherever woodlands have been cleared or burned over. Fireweed. It's really quite beautiful. If Jesus had been from that part of the world, I think he might have spoken of that instead of fig trees.

For us here, maybe it's in the smile of one of our Wednesday Walker kids learns to recognize a new sight word that he's been struggling with for weeks. Or, maybe it's knowing that one of the elementary school parents we give a bottle of water to on Monday afternoons has felt welcomed and at home because she smiles and stops to chat and ask about our church. Or, maybe it's a friend who's fighting cancer, keeping up a brave front, but who tears up when told that he is being prayed for. Maybe it's just coming up to this rail, as different as we all are, suddenly made one in recognizing our dependence on Christ's love.

We get glimpses, don't we? Here and there and now and then. God is faithful. God is always coming if we have eyes to see, and we're watching. This season, and always, when it all gets to be just too much, be alert. Know that God is near. Keep praying that you might find yourself not caught unexpectedly empty, but welcoming Christ.

Amen.