

## “Watch, Pray, and Work”

Luke 21:25-36

At the beginning of Luke 21, leading up to today’s gospel’s test, Jesus and his disciples are in the Jerusalem temple when a certain rich man entered. He took his time at the collection box, attracting as much attention as he could. Dipping into his pocket, he gathered up a handful of large, shining, gold coins. Raising his hand high above the collection box, he dropped his money in, one gold coin at a time. The resounding jingle caused heads to turn and murmuring lips to marvel at the rich man’s generosity. He had accomplished his purpose of drawing attention to himself.

At the beginning of chapter 21, “Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, ‘Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.’”

It was his way of alerting his followers that a gift was not to be measured by its quantity – but by what the giver has left after the gift is given. The rich man’s prosperity was unaffected by his display of gold coins. But the widow’s two copper coins were a very real sacrifice.

But even more important than the giving, Jesus pointed out the difference between genuine devotion and superficial showing off. But not even the disciples

understood.

In the very next verse, “some of them were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts.” They had totally missed the object lesson Jesus had just taught. Jesus preferred the simplicity and sincerity of the widow’s offering just as he would prefer a simple place of worship. His wooden cross would be very real and very simple.

Jesus responds to their comment, admiring the ornate temple, with a shocking word of prophecy when he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

With faltering voices, his disciples ask him; “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”

Then Jesus began to describe the coming judgment in verse 9. “When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.”

Jesus continues his description of the coming judgment in the first four verses of our gospel text . . . <sup>25</sup>here 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."

What motivated Jesus to make such frightening predictions? As much as he loved the traditions of his people, there was something pretentious and hypocritical in the Judaism of his day that Jesus despised. The arrogance of the rich and the lowliness of the poor disturbed him as it continues to disturb him today. The worship had somehow become superficial. The preoccupation of the Pharisees with law, with do's and don't's of the Old Testament, while neglecting true justice and compassion for everyone – distressed him. The gaudy temple, with priests who were meticulous about liturgical detail, but insensitive to the needs of the people, contradicted his model of true servanthood.

Jesus came to change all of this. Expressing the outrage of God, he predicted that before the "Son of Man", the Messiah, returns in glorious victory to establish the Kingdom of God, wars and persecutions will plague the earth. But out of these hard times, divine victory would emerge. To illustrate his message, he used an example from nature. Figs were eaten at almost every meal, as their sweetness was enjoyed.

"Then he told them a parable: Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon

as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.”

No tree of Palestine seems so dead during winter as the fig tree; but with the annual return of sap through the bare spiky twigs, the tree bursts forth with new life out of death. With the snow and cold winds of Northeast Ohio, it can be difficult to believe in six months the fields and trees will be turning green again. But first the storms of winter must be weathered.

In the same way, only after Christianity has weathered the storm of winter and experienced the agony of apparent death “will you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

At this point in the gospel story, Jesus could see the storm clouds gathering. Jesus was experiencing resistance. He felt his critics closing in. His disciples and close friends were aware of the conspiracy to silence him. The Pharisees who opposed him were becoming more determined. Jesus understood the resistance he was experiencing would also be felt by his followers.

Jesus preaches endurance. He knew his followers would be disappointed if this glorious kingdom he had predicted did not come right away. Some of the first Christians went so far as to refuse to work or start a family because they believed Jesus would return immediately.

In an effort to shield them against the pain of sure disappointment when the

kingdom of God did not come, Jesus gives them some advise on what to do in the meantime.

<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."

"Be alert, pray, and have strength". Another translation – "Watch, Pray, and Work."

Jesus did not return immediately and some of his followers were very disappointed. Others took his advise to watch, pray, and have strength. They endured.

We live 2,000 years later and Jesus still has not returned in a cloud with power and great glory. The fig tree still has not sprouted it's leaves. How can we believe he's still coming? How can we continue to endure? How can we be careful that our hearts not be weighed down by dissipation, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life? How can we always be watching, praying, and gaining strength?

We can never know when Jesus will return in all his power and glory. Those denominations who spend their time and energy trying to predict it, only set themselves up for disappointment. But in these passages from Luke, Jesus tells us

what we can be doing in the meantime.

First, be alert or be on watch at all times. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down.” What are the anxiety producers that weigh down your heart? It could be the weather or the house that doesn’t stay warm enough. Maybe the family has got us down. The teenager stays out too late or the wife is spending way too much on Christmas gifts. Maybe the job has got us down. Business is slow or the co-workers don’t pull their weight. Maybe the church has got us down. I feel like I’m always being asked to serve when I don’t have the time or maybe – I wish someone would ask me to serve and recognize my gifts. Maybe it’s a battle with cancer or some other illness.

All of these and many more are anxiety producers that can close in on us like a trap. They can separate us from God and from one another. They can weaken us and make us very vulnerable. Yet they are nothing in comparison to the anxieties Jesus faced as he walked the way of the cross, knowing he would be nailed to a piece of wood. He tells us how to deal with anxiety out of experience.

First, watch for it and be able to recognize those things taking us out of fellowship with God and with this community. Do not deny that anxieties exist but confess them.

Then pray that you might have the strength to overcome them and to stand before the Son of Man.

Many of us try to overcome the anxieties of daily living by throwing ourselves into our work. We find spiritual strength in doing what we do best. For me, it is sitting down and writing. That is alright. Jesus knew we would do that, so he emphasizes prayer and finding strength through prayer and work.

When we combine work and prayer we recover the awareness of the presence of God in our work. We realize that the God we worship is not passive, but the working Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. The realization that the Kingdom of God is the ceaseless work of God and that our work here in this community is a small part of that work.

No matter how dismal our work and our lives might seem right now, there is light at the end of December. That is why the Advent season can generate so much excitement. It is a time of hope, of happiness, of helpfulness.

Advent means the anticipated arrival of an important event or person. We remember the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. We remember that Jesus lived and that he lives with us as the Risen Christ. And that someday he will come again.

Drowsy Christians, it's time to wake up. Decorate your trees, light your candles, buy your gifts but not too many, send your cards, and fill your lives and your church with love. Prepare the way for Christ's birthday.

Authentic Christianity is Adventist Christianity – our watching, praying, and working, as acts of anticipation on our journey toward Bethlehem's manger.

A feeling of expectancy. In Sandi Patti's song, "We Shall Behold Him," she sings

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The angel shall sound  
The shout of His coming  
The sleeping shall rise  
From their slumbering place  
And those who remain  
Shall be changed in a moment  
And we shall behold Him  
Then face to face

A feeling of expectancy. Listen and watch. May the peace of God . . .

#254 - Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus

