“Strength to Escape All These Things”


Part I of VI in “A Light to the Nations” Advent Sermon Series

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From the Pulpit
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A Sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 28, 2021, Advent I, dedicated to Samuel Anderson Rink on his baptismal day and all the children who have been born and baptized during this pandemic and to their parents who have done exceedingly well to birth and raise them in trying times and always to the glory of God!

“Strength to Escape All These Things”


Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen

What does the end of the world have to do with preparing for Christmas and the birth of Jesus? On the surface, this is a terrible way to begin our happy advance to Christmas Day. Shouldn’t we be reading about shepherds and angels, the wise ones from the east, the star of Bethlehem and the cooing of a newborn baby born in a barn? Why have heaven and earth collapsed, the sun, moon and stars rained fire? And once again… what have you done with our precious baby boy?
Today’s reading from Luke opens our journey to Bethlehem in Jerusalem – only a matter of days before Jesus’ arrest, fake trial, real crucifixion and resurrection. We find ourselves standing in the Great Temple of Jerusalem listening to Jesus’ final sermon. He is not speaking wistfully about his childhood as a carpenter’s son or his early ministry by the Sea of Galilee. He is not healing the sick. He is preaching about the end of the life and the world as we know it.

The 21st chapter of Luke opens 24 verses earlier with Jesus telling a simple story of the widow sharing her gifts with God. While others give out of their abundance, she gives out of her poverty. She gives all she has – out of love for God (Luke 21:1-4).

From here Jesus pivots. He turns his focus to an apocalyptic future filled with severe challenges and change. The followers of Jesus will face false messiahs who make fake claims about themselves and the sequence of events and what those events mean (21:8). Jesus’ followers will face wars and insurrections; natural disasters and cosmic terrors (Luke 21: 9-11). Did someone say Insurrection? Did someone say something about Q-Anon?

And before this End of Time arrives, they will have to bear witness to their faith. While others claim the end of the world as we know it, the followers of Jesus will be called upon to say, “Time belongs to God and God will decide when the end is here. Not now you. Not me. God decides this.”

This witnessing, Jesus says, will come under great stress and pain. In what appears to be an absolute contradiction of everything he just said, Jesus declares that through all of this, God will protect “every hair on their heads” (vs. 12-19).
Then, Jesus delivers the gut punch. The city in which they are standing, the temple in which he is teaching and in which they are all worshipping, will be utterly destroyed (an actual event which happens in 66-70 CE – 30 years after Jesus said this and 20 years prior to Luke writing it down vs. 20-24). In other words – they will lose their homes, their place of worship, their neighborhoods, their families, their friends and perhaps – even their own lives.

The verses leading up to our reading today, are enough to literally put the fear of God in a person. Only after this long apocalyptic prelude, does Jesus arrive at our text for today – the arrival of the “Son of Man” on a cloud in power and glory.

Are you catching on that the arrival of the son of God involves a lot more than a baby in a manger on Christmas morning? The Christmas story is a small part of entire cosmic design which involves the shaking of the foundation of the world through wars, insurrections, earthquakes, horrible storms, the collapse of the heavens and the arrival of hope in the midst of terrifying truth.

Jesus calls everyone – in the face of everything that is coming – to be on guard so you are not side-swiped by all of this. He calls everyone in the temple congregation that day and ever since to be alert at all times. He calls everyone to depend on prayer for deliverance.

Listen to this. In Jesus’ words, “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” (Luke 21:36).

We pray to find “the strength to escape all these things.” The Greek word for “escape” is ekpheugo (ek-fyoo-go) – “to flee out” or “to run away.”
Pray to run away from these things. It sounds like Jesus is issuing a Tsunami Warning. “Evacuation is recommended. Get as far away from the Ocean as possible. Get to High Ground as soon as possible.”

We find strength in these times in this dual movement of reflection and action. We also look to the natural order of life to see our way through the disasters to the other side of hope. In the mini-parable of the fig tree (and all the trees), Jesus points out that the sprouting of the leaves tells you summer is already here – so too does the arrival of all these events tell you that the kingdom of God is near. But you have to literally “read the leaves” before you can harvest the fig. You also have to read the signs before you can experience the fullness of God’s kingdom.

How do we do this? How to we read the leaves? How do we find strength to escape all these things?

First, to find strength to survive all these things, we must be Aware. Awareness is a spiritual gift and calling. To be aware is to be attentive. If you are not attentive, you will miss the moment of your calling. Awareness is not simply what we read with our eyes or hear with our ears on the news. Jesus is telling us if we are to find “the strength to escape all these things,” we need to fully engage all our senses. That’s what awareness does. Awareness engages all the senses – seeing, listening, touching, tasting, and smelling. Pray with all your senses wide open. Pray with your eyes, your ears, your fingers, your tongue and your nose.

Many years ago, I met an Amish farmer who would taste the soil on his land. He would get some dirt and eat it. I watched him do this. He could tell if his soil was alive or was dying from tasting it. He
looked at me with a smile and said, “this tastes good. My prayers have been answered.” How many of us know the earth so intimately that we can taste if it is healthy or sick? Many of us can do it with food. But, can we do it with the place from where all blessings flow?

On Thanksgiving Day, I sat next to Rylan, one of three of my four-year-old grandsons. He held my hand while we prayed. When the prayer ended, he held on. He kissed my hand and said, “Pop Pop, I love you.” He was not going to let go. His sense of my presence and my sense of his was heightened by the touch of our hands.

Later, listening to my granddaughter Emryn’s breathing as she fell asleep in my arms allowed me to tell that she was finally resting. Listening to her breathing just a little bit longer allowed me to connect with her life, with her stillness when she had been full throttle active just moments before. Then, when she awakened at the end of her nap, I had a tremendous sense of awareness that she needed my help by using my nose. To help Emryn (and everyone) escape that certain smell, my nose needed to be aware.

All my senses were engaged on Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving prayers were answered through heightened awareness of the fullness of life.

But awareness is only half of what Jesus speaks about. The second thing we need to find is strength to survive all these things, for us to be On Guard.

To this end, being on guard engages our Sixth Sense – our intuitive nature. We need to be aware that the global community and the planet are spinning out of control. Jesus has laid out the case for a world turned upside down. He has shown us that we need to protect this planet and one another from the craziness of these times. In
his case, the Roman Empire was literally breathing down his neck. As a messianic leader, Jesus was seen as a threat to Caesar and his minions. You and I cannot exist in this state, this country, and this world being oblivious to the onslaught being delivered in climate imbalance, planetary distress, hot wars and cyber wars, those around us and among us who would destroy democracy and replace it with autocracy and fascistic rule. These challenges we all hold “self-evident” and treasure as true for our nation and this world are also real.

After all, the word “Apocalypse” comes from the Greek apokálypsis “uncovering,” which is a derivative of the verb apokalýptein “to take the cover off.” When Jesus is speaking to all these things that challenge and change the balance of life as we know it, he is “uncovering” things in the world around us. He is revealing what we may not see or sense. We need to be on guard. When something “feels” all wrong, it probably is – at least partially – wrong. For example, when someone calls the Insurrection of January 6, 2021 “a normal tour of the Capital” as U.S. Congressman Andrew Clyde of Georgia did on May 13th of this year, you absolutely know that everything about that is wrong. If you don’t, your “on guard” sense is not working.

Do you see how this works? Each of us should be fully aware and on guard every day if we are to find strength to escape all these things – those close at hand and those “writ large” in our lives and in this world.

In his poem, “The Growing Edge” Howard Thurman writes:
All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born;
All around us life is dying and life is being born:
The fruit ripens on the tree,
The roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth
Against the time where there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit.
Such is the growing edge!
It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung,
The one more thing to try when all else has failed,
The upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor.
This is the basis of hope in moments of despair,
The incentive to carry on when times are out of joint
And men have lost their reason; the source of confidence
When the worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash.
The birth of a child – life’s most dramatic answer to death –
This is the Growing Edge incarnate,
Look well to the growing edge!

Seek the “Growing Edge.” It is here that we will discover what we need to embrace the coming of our Incarnate Lord. Amen.