

Advent 1 C 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

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Luke 21:25-36; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

You've probably heard of the famous 20th century writer C.S. Lewis. Clive Staples Lewis. He was British. He was an eloquent lay person. He wrote works of fiction such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*. And he wrote about Christianity and theology and God. He was a believer, a thoughtful Christian. He once wrote something about today's gospel reading. C.S. Lewis wrote in 1952 about "the most embarrassing verse in the Bible." That's something, isn't it? There are at least 31,000 verses in the Bible. What do you think is the most embarrassing verse in the Bible?

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Verse 32 in today's gospel. According to C.S. Lewis, that's the most embarrassing verse in the Bible.¹ This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. Distress among nations. Confusion. The Son of Man coming in a cloud. It might seem like Jesus is talking about something from the headlines. The end times. The signs of the times. The signs of the end times. It might seem like Jesus is talking about our times. But he also says, "This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place." Luke chapter 21, verse 32. He's saying to people around him that they will see these things happening. And that's why C.S. Lewis called this the most embarrassing verse in the Bible. Because if we are talking about the end of history, the day of judgment, the second coming of Christ, then this should have happened in the lifetime of the apostles. In the first century. These are words from the lips of Jesus: "This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place." Either Jesus was wrong. Or Jesus meant something different than what most people think that he meant. If Jesus was wrong, then this is the most embarrassing verse in the Bible. Jesus seemingly predicted a dramatic end to human history, and he promised that it would happen within this generation. Jesus predicted that, and it's recorded in the gospels, and he was wrong. The most embarrassing verse in the Bible. [Mark 13:30 // Matthew 24:34 // Luke 21:32]

Many modern scholars are persuaded that Jesus was originally referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and of its temple, which took place approximately forty years after the crucifixion of Jesus. This conclusion is so pervasive among scholars that it is commonly used to help establish the dates that the four gospels were written. The Old Testament prophets predicted the destruction of Samaria and the Northern kingdom, and the destruction of Jerusalem the first time by Babylon. The book of Daniel at face value predicts the fall of Babylon and Persia, and implies the fall of the Macedonian empire. Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by

the Romans. And Revelation predicts the fall of the Roman Empire. Meanwhile, without predicting the rise and fall of empires, the apostle Paul, in his New Testament writings, routinely asserts the return of Jesus; our second reading today is one example: *May he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.* So there is a variety of biblical texts, predicting a variety of things, at a variety of points in history.

This gives certain Christians a lot of pieces to use. Kind of like making hot dogs. A variety of different pieces go into the machine, and a hot dog comes out the other side. The ideas that are popularized by certain Christians in the media, such as the series of books and movies called “Left Behind” are a particular weiner that comes from selectively using pieces of the Bible, or more accurately, selectively mis-using them. Mis-using them. These hot dog makers undermine the principal message of Revelation, which is hope, by removing the church through the artificial mechanism of what they call the rapture. And these hot dog makers are directly opposed to Jesus himself, who cautioned against trying to know when and how these things would happen. The Bible makes a variety of predictions, some of which came true long ago, and those predictions cannot necessarily be re-packaged and re-gifted for today’s Christians. However, the consistent thread through all of those writings is hope. Rather than being a blueprint for history, these writings are saying that despite history, our hope is in God and our trust is in God. This past week the Church commemorated Isaac Watts, the writer of hymns. He wrote these words, based on Psalm 90: *Time, like an ever-rolling stream, soon bears us all away. We fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op’ning day. O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, still be our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home.* This is the lens that Jesus, Paul, and Revelation use to focus upon historic events.

The first Sunday in Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. As with any birthday or new year’s celebration, there is a sense of time moving forward. But there is also a sense of the repetition of a cycle. Most of us have just completed Thanksgiving celebrations. Each Thanksgiving is different from last year’s or the year before. And each Thanksgiving is sort of the same as the year before. The kids get older. People get married. Then divorced. Then re-married. But the green bean casserole stays the same. Time moves forward in a straight line. But it also rolls in a never-ending circle. Eternity. Which is one reason the Advent wreath is so popular. Made of greens that seem to never die. And in the shape of a circle, which never ends. A circle in which the end becomes the beginning, and the beginning meets the end. Alpha and Omega, the A and Z of the Greek alphabet, as the book of Revelation says.

The word “advent” is Latin and it means coming. The coming of the Lord, the arrival of God in our lives. And the coming of God into our lives is cyclical. It is eternal. In the most literal and basic telling of the story, God came to be with us in Jesus when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That happened long ago. But in the cyclical nature of time, we sort of pretend that we are getting ready for him to be born this year, on December 25. Advent gets ready for the birth of Jesus. Again. Even though it already happened. God came to us in the baby Jesus in the manger. God will someday come again to bring closure to history. God comes to us in word and

sacrament. Which is why we sing “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” before we receive communion. God comes to us in the stranger on the road of life. In all of these ways, God comes. God meets us. In Bethlehem. In the end times. In the life of the church that we call word and sacrament. And in the neighbor that we meet in daily, secular life. And Advent honors all of those things. Advent is about the coming of God in Jesus Christ. And therefore, how can we be ready for his arrival. Indeed, if his arrival is mysterious— in the sacrament of holy communion, for example, or in the neighbor that we meet on the road— if his arrival is mysterious and unexpected, then how can we be ready for that? Indeed, one of the great Advent carols of Lutheranism begins with this question: *O Lord, how shall I meet you?*

In today’s gospel, Jesus says: “*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*” Far from telling us to hoard canned food and to build bomb shelters and to stock up on ammunition, Jesus tells us that in the midst of history and its troubles, we should stand up and raise our heads. Jesus urges us to be hopeful, that is, full of hope. Hope is one way to be prepared to meet God when he comes. Remembering those who are forgotten. Assisting a stranger in need. Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly. These are ways to open our hearts and our minds to the coming of God into our lives. Watchfulness, wakefulness, mindfulness— these are ways to open our hearts and our minds. Repentance, acknowledging our responsibility, lamenting our mistakes, making amends— these are ways to open our hearts and our minds. The gift of Advent is the truth that God did not simply come into the world long ago. God is not merely going to come again in some future apocalypse. God draws near, now. It is a cyclical truth. Advent summons us to be ready not just for God in the future. But for the God who is at hand now. Amen.

1.C.S. Lewis, *The World’s Last Night, and Other Essays* (1952, 1960)