

Grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come. Amen.

LIFT UP YOUR HEADS!

Luke 21:25-36 | The First Sunday of Advent | Nov 29/Dec 2, 2018

“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Jesus

In the name of Jesus whose words will never pass away, dear friends:

Proper posture is important. Recently I’ve come across two products designed to improve posture. One is a sort-of posture alarm. You attach a little electronic device to your shirt collar. When you begin to slouch it beeps a warning telling you to straighten up. Another one I saw is a posture corrector. This is a type of harness that you wear around your shoulders that physically forces you into better posture.

Why is all this important? Because bad posture can lead to soreness and pain, poor circulation and digestion, carpal tunnel syndrome, back problems and all kinds of other issues. Proper posture is important.

Jesus brings up the topic of posture in our text. He’s not really talking about physical posture, but the posture of faith. He says to us weary and burdened believers, suffering and struggling in a sin-darkened world: LIFT UP YOUR HEADS! In faith, we lift up our heads to watch for his coming. We do so (I) with the certainty that he is coming soon, (II) with joy and hope in our hearts, and (III) with watchfulness and prayer.

I. With Certainty that Christ is Coming

It was Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus had been spending a lot of time at the Temple in Jerusalem. Earlier in the week when his disciples were admiring the temple’s beauty and grandeur, Jesus warned them that it would be destroyed. That happened in the year 70 when Roman general Titus led his legions into the Holy City. The destruction of Jerusalem foreshadowed the greater destruction that Jesus talks about in our text: Judgment Day.

There are a number of signs that will precede the Last Day: false Messiahs and false teachers, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, wickedness and hatred. All of these are happening now. In our text Jesus also talks about **“signs in the sun, moon and stars,”** confusion, terror and apprehension among the people of the world, the shaking of the heavenly bodies. And finally, at the end of all these signs, the Son of Man himself will come **“in a cloud with power and great glory”** – not the helpless babe of Bethlehem, but the King of kings and Lord of lords to whom every knee will bow.

A question: Do we take these signs

seriously? When is the last time you woke up and thought: *Today could be the day!* When you signed that thirty-year mortgage, did you entertain the idea that you might not have to pay it off because Jesus could come again before those three decades have passed? When you think about the future – plans for education and employment, plans for vacations and retirement, whatever – does your future include the possibility that Jesus could return before you put on that mortarboard or punch out for the last time?

In his Second Epistle, Peter talks about “scoffers” who ask, **“Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation”** (3:4). When we think of the Last Day we probably don’t scoff or make fun. Our sin is more subtle: We often just don’t think about it at all. There’s little urgency or anticipation. We figure life will go as it always has. And so we keep our heads bowed and our eyes focused only on this life. Shame on us for such sinful apathy!

Jesus is coming. His promise is clear: **“I am coming soon”** (Revelation 22:20). The signs are all around us. And so Jesus tells us to lift up our heads. Think of the five-year-old who is watching out the window, waiting for his dad to return from work. Think of the student anxiously watching for the mailman to bring him that college acceptance letter. That’s our posture in watching for our Lord’s return. Heads held high, eyes wide open, and hearts filled with joy and hope.

II. With Joy and Hope in Your Heart

Why joy and hope? I mean, we just talked about our sinful apathy. We’re all guilty of being obsessed with this life and thinking precious little about our eternal future. Won’t Jesus come to destroy us? Won’t he expose our shame to the world and make us pay for our sins. No! Listen to what he says: **“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”** Note it well: Not destruction. Not damnation. Redemption!

Redemption is a beautiful concept. And, to be clear, our redemption has already happened. Jesus has redeemed us. He paid the ransom price to set us free from our slavery to sin and death and the devil’s power. Again, we turn to the word of Peter: **You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect** (1 Peter 1:18-19).

God’s Son was conceived and born in our flesh, lived perfectly in our place, and offered his innocent life as the perfect sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world. All the gold and silver in the universe isn’t worth even one drop of Jesus’ blood. With that precious blood God’s own Son broke the chains that bound us forever. We are free: free from the devil’s power, free from the slavery of sin, free from the punishment we deserve, free to live lives of love for both God and neighbor. The

crushing weight of our guilt no longer gives us the posture of the damned. No we are the redeemed, with heads lifted high, watching for our Lord's return with great joy and hope.

So, if Jesus has already redeemed us, how can he say **“your redemption is drawing near”**? Redemption in this case is a kind of shorthand for the ultimate results of that redemption. He's coming again to right every wrong, to destroy every evil, to end our struggle, to rescue us from this ugly, ruined, sin-filled world, to finally bring us home to the paradise that he purchased for us with his holy blood.

I suppose waiting for eternal glory is a little like waiting for those packages to arrive from Amazon (something many of us are familiar with at this time of year). The order has been placed, your credit card has been charged, the product is legally yours. But you don't get to enjoy it until that package with the smile printed on the side finally shows up at your doorstep. Your place in heaven has been reserved. Jesus has purchased it with his precious blood. You have eternal life. But you don't get to enjoy it fully until “the package” arrives, until death or the Last Day come calling. Then you will enjoy the full joy of heavenly glory.

III. With Watchfulness and Prayer

We're not in paradise yet. Until Jesus returns or the Lord calls us home by death, we continue as part of the Church Militant. We still have battles to wage, temptations to resist and crosses to bear. Not only that but we have paychecks to

earn, families to care for, daily tasks to attend to. We're busy. In all this busyness it's easy to get distracted. Jesus warns us about this: **“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”**

Some have called the time from Christ's first coming to his second “the great between.” Jesus gives us three pieces of advice – three commands really – to help us make it through these dark, dangerous, in-between days.

First he says: **“Be careful.”** Think of a dad teaching his daughter how to use a table saw. That saw is a dangerous tool that can take off a finger in a heartbeat. So she needs to be careful and alert. We too need to be careful, because this world is a dangerous place. We need to recognize the temptations that are especially hard for us and avoid them. We need to realize our own natural weakness and our need to be strengthened regularly through Word and sacrament.

Second, Jesus says: **“Watch.”** When I was learning to drive, both of my parents talked about the importance of being a “defensive driver.” They told me to keep my eyes wide open and my head on a swivel, to always be watching not just

what I'm doing but more importantly what the other driver is doing. They told me to expect the other driver to do something wrong so that I'd be ready when it happens. In a similar way we need to be awake and alert and watching for our Lord's return. We can't let the passing of the days lull us to sleep. We need to have the daily attitude: *Jesus could come again today!*

Finally, Jesus says, **"Pray."** Such a simple command, such a wonderful gift and yet at the same time such an underused resource. We have a direct line to God himself, a divine ear that is ready and eager to listen 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We need to use this resource. We need to talk to God daily, ask him to strengthen our faith and so improve our spiritual posture.

What's the point of all this care and watchfulness and prayer? Jesus answers: **"That you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."** To survive the destruction of the last Day we need to be spiritually alert. We need faith in Jesus. By his grace, we have it. We have the proper posture. We don't need to hang our heads in shame or look away in fear. No, dear friends, lift up your heads. Your redemption is drawing near. The one whose words will never pass away promises, **"I am coming soon."** And we answer. **Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.**

S.D.G.