

Advent – A Warning And A Promise

A sermon by Rev. David Johnson

A couple years ago, we went to the NJ shore, and needed to get gas on the way. I pulled up to the pump and got out of my car like usual, planning on filling up the tank. I was quickly chided and instructed that in NJ, the gas is pumped by trained people, and that I could get back in my car while the service-person pumped my gas. I was surprised and got back in my car, thinking about the blessing of having someone else take care of this task. I couldn't help but think, "Wow, they still have full-service at NJ gas stations." That is, until I found out the truth of the situation.

I shared my experience with some of you "natives," and you chuckled. I also came across an article written by Dr. John Trent, popular author and Christian counselor, and president of StrongFamilies.com. He wrote:

"In the state of New Jersey, like everywhere else across the country, the cost of gasoline has gone up. It seems that in 2006, in the face of soaring prices, the governor tried to implement a policy that experts calculated would drop the price of gasoline five to ten cents per gallon immediately. There could be huge savings statewide if they would just make a small policy change. But even the suggestion brought a huge outcry. In fact, the governor's office backed off the idea when they were swamped with more than 1,400 emails and calls.

What fired up the people so much? The governor had suggested that people be allowed to pump their own gas! But in New Jersey, motorists haven't pumped their own gas for 57 years, and suddenly there were cries that:

- *People would put gas in the wrong hole.*
- *The elderly couldn't handle the task and hurt themselves.*
- *Gas stations would be blowing up all over the state from smokers filling their own tanks!"*

In short, as Dr. Trent points out, fear paralyzed the state from taking a constructive step towards savings. The governor and his team had brought good news of a fine plan, with a profitable end. But the plan meant change, and more responsibility for themselves. This, combined with the fear of the unknown, brought fiscal inactivity and economic stagnation.

This is commonly what happens when people hear alarming news, much like what happened in Luke 11.

Luke 21:25 "There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, 26 men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 "Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN A CLOUD with power and great glory."

"dismay ... perplexity ... fainting (expiring) from fear and expectation..." How terrible is news of the unknown. Likewise, how intimidating are the events surrounding the return of Jesus. And though the victorious and glorified Christ will usher in wonderful blessings for His Body, the circumstances themselves will be frightening.

But that is just the point. The reason for Jesus' warning and accompanying exhortation is that the *unknown* would now be *known*. Banished are the fears associated with the unfamiliar. Plans can now be made, new courses charted, and a known future can be expected. Like in the familiar Christmas classic, A Christmas Carol. The point of the harsh messages of Spirits Past, Present, and Future, is the hopeful of transformation and change.

The expected end of Jesus' warning includes the arrival and reigning presence of the "*Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.*" How can fear remain when the promise of God's ever-present power waits on the horizon? Why would any true believer be dismayed or perplexed, when we know that the glory and light of the Son of Man will brighten every corner of heaven and earth?

So if God doesn't want fear and dread to consume the believer's heart, what should? Interestingly, the void left by banishing a spirit of fear or dread, is to be filled by an attitude of anticipation and preparation. And to clarify His purpose and motivation, Jesus shares a quick parable:

Luke 21:29-31 "Then He told them a parable: "Behold the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. ³¹ So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near.

Jesus doesn't speak of temperatures falling and leaves turning colors and dropping. For many, those are sad signs of the coming fall and winter. Instead, He speaks of leaves budding, and the signs of spring. Jesus is describing a scene of anticipation and hope, not dread and despair. He then shares a promise that is designed to cement this hope in the reality of eternity.

Luke 21:32-33 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all things take place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.

Jesus understands that there will be those who question and doubt the material events of nature and culture. They will see nations rise and fall, and all that has been the foundation of their security will fade. They will succumb to great fear and dread, for all they have trusted will be shaken. But just as surely as the seasons come and go, so also will the events of eternity...and those who have eyes to see and evaluate this truth need not despair. In fact, the statements and Word of God (Jesus) will outlive all material realities; outlasting both heaven and earth together. To put it in our modern vernacular, "God (Jesus) said it – I believe it – That settles it."

But recognition isn't enough - to know what's coming doesn't mean you're ready for it. As the context shows us, preparation is the action connected to the detection. A coming hurricane may be report for days before it hits, but that doesn't mean you're prepared for it.

Luke 21:28 "But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near ... ³⁴ "Be on guard, so that your hearts will

not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; 35 for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. 36 "But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

"Straighten up ... lift up your head ... Be on guard ... Keep on the alert..." This is a pretty tall, if not impossible order, for a people who by nature become consumed by fear and despair. Instead of following these exhortations, all too often we panic and give way to chaos. We need something, outside ourselves, enabling us to accomplish this seemingly impossible feat. V. 28 gives us the necessary motivation for this transformation: "...because your redemption is drawing near..."

In other words, to be redeemed, or ransomed by great price, is to be delivered, saved and rescued to a place of safety and prosperity. This is precisely what Jesus (our Yeshua) came to bring us, salvation by paying our ransom with His blood. We are saved by the process of redemption. Our Salvation (rescue) is complete by Jesus' payment in His blood.

This is the foundation for both anticipation and preparation. Jesus' return is not only sure, but eminent; and this truth should bring a strengthening to our resolve and boldness to our faith. That is why Jesus could tell us to, "Straighten up ... lift up your head ... Be on guard ... Keep on the alert..." even though the passage continues to share some sobering warnings.

You see, confidence replaces discouragement, and anticipation replaces despair. Rather than people hanging their heads, their shoulders slumped in fear and dread; there ought to be a straightening of the back, and a raising of the head in confident knowledge that salvation is on its way. Because of this confidence, we should be determined to keep our walk free from compromising elements that might bring shame or judgment.

In our passage from Luke, Jesus understood his listeners need for hope, confidence, and boldness. "Needy" is a very good word to describe Jesus' audience, making these messages all the more poignant and hope-inspiring. Similarly, we are all needy, spiritually speaking. Ever since the fall in Genesis 3, every human being begins life as an exile, an exile from God. God has demanded righteousness and holiness, but all we can offer Him is our sin-sick hearts. We are desperate for help and cannot free ourselves (Romans 3:10-18, 22-24). And we also need to hear this message of redemptive salvation.

Micah 4:3-4 And He will judge between many peoples And render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they train for war. ⁴ Each of them will sit under his vine And under his fig tree, With no one to make them afraid, For the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.