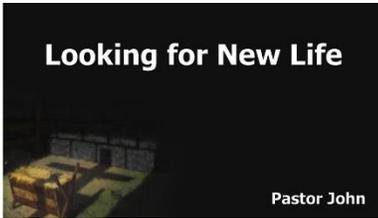


Luke 21: 25-38

²⁵ "There 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.

²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is 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. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." ²⁹ Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴ "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, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ 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." ³⁷ Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called. ³⁸ And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.



Advent begins today! Happy new year!! In the Christian year, after all, today is January 1st. As the passage for today was read, maybe you wondered how this was an Advent text. Maybe you thought that we were getting a little ahead of ourselves according to the Christmas story as it is normally told. Usually we begin with John the Baptist and then turn to the angelic visits to Mary and Joseph, we have a birth, and then the shepherds enter and off we go. But in our text today, from Luke 21, we begin just before the Last Supper, trial, and crucifixion that fills Luke 22 and 23. So, on the first day of the Christian year, we begin near the end of Jesus' story. Advent is not just about the birth and the first coming of Christ. It is also about the second coming of Christ. This is where we begin Advent today. Our passage from Luke invites us into anticipation and expectancy. Let us pray...

Our passage today begins with Jesus talking about the signs that will come at the end of this age. In the opening verses we read, *"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations"*. We hear about climate change and see massive wildfires and hurricanes and flooding in these places and we hear about famine and drought and starvation in those places. We hear about a caravan of people headed for our southern border and we hear about wars and violence and the abuses of human rights all around the globe. We look at the world and we shake our heads. We can even look at our own community and wonder what has happened or at what is happening at times. We think things like, *"Life just isn't what it used to be"* and *"Things seem to be getting worse"*. Sometimes I think that this is what people have been thinking ever since Jesus the man first left this earth.

In our parable today, Jesus says, *"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"*. Yes, our passage from Luke 21 begins



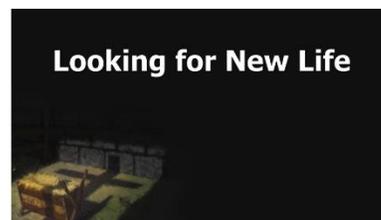
with some gloom and doom, but that is not where Jesus goes with His teaching that is the heart of today's message. Yes, all this destruction and horror will unfold, and it will be terrible, but that is down the road a ways. Jesus did not say this: *"When the fig tree loses its leaves, you know that winter is coming"*. This is a much different message, right? In our parable, Jesus is speaking of the hope and new life that is about to come. To describe what was coming when this earth is no more, Jesus uses the metaphor of summer approaching and the new life that comes to describe a wonderful and amazing kingdom where all things will be made new and whole again. The coming kingdom is not wintery and barren – it is joyous and glorious and is full of life. This is the kingdom that Jesus speaks of in today's parable and it is the kingdom that we as Christians should anticipate and look forward to with expectancy and hope.



In the parable of the fig tree, Jesus is speaking of the sign of new life budding and of the hope and promise that new life brings. This leads us to a few questions about our day and time and place. In Winner and in Colome and in the other places that we dwell, where is new life budding? Where is hope being born? And more importantly, how are we, both as individuals and as a community of faith, participating in the coming new kingdom of God?

And even more importantly, how are we helping others participate? Last week I spoke of us living with hands active in the present. Where were you active last week?

Yes, our passage today began with doom and gloom – and, yes, there is plenty of that in the world – but above all that, for us and for Christians everywhere, there is hope and faith in Jesus Christ. Remember last week, when I spoke of ‘basement’ and ‘balcony’ people? The basement is full of doom and gloom. But that is not the message of Advent, that is not the message of the parable today, and that is not the message of our faith. The message of Advent, the message of the parable today, and the message of our faith is about hope and promise. It is with faith and hope that we are looking for new life. It is with faith built upon hope and the promise of new life that we take in the view from the balcony. Advent is about God’s plan to redeem and restore all of creation, to bring new life. And it is a plan that we have a role in.



We have a role because we, the human race, have always been linked to the creation and to the earth. The Garden of Eden was God’s ideal creation – a glimpse into paradise or into heaven. When sin entered the world, death entered the world too. Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden and out of God’s daily presence, but their sin also affected the creation. The earth no longer just bore food for mankind but was cursed with thorns and thistles. Death also came to creation. Cycles of life were begun that continue to this day. Seasons reflect these cycles. Jesus even makes note of this in our passage – as

the fig tree buds, we know that summer is near. In the seasons, summer brings growth and life; fall brings harvest and celebration; and, winter brings barren earth and long, cold, dark nights.

Within the changing of the seasons, just as with harvest comes joy, with winter comes fear. In an earlier time in Christianity, back in the third and fourth centuries, people would watch the light dwindle, would feel the warmth weaken, and would begin to feel the fear for survival crouching over them. People sensed a need for hope. Around that time, non-Christians would light ritual fires on the winter solstice – the darkest night of the year – to remember that spring was coming, and with it, hope. Christians also began celebrating the thought of the second coming of Christ during this time of year, remembering the light of the world that was coming again one day, bringing people of faith hope. Instead of a season of dread and fear, Advent became a season of hopeful expectation. As our Advent study book also reminds us, “in the bleak midwinter” the source of our hope was born.

In Romans 8, Paul connects our longing for the second coming of Christ with creation’s longing for renewal and restoration. Paul writes about creation groaning as it awaits rebirth and this new life - this redemption and restoration this new life. God’s plan for restoration is for a new heaven and a new earth. It is for humanity as well as for the rest of creation. The changing seasons of the year remind us of the natural cycles of life and death. Plants sprout, grow, wither, and die, only to repeat the endless cycle year after year. Within this cycle, both for nature and for humans, winter is also a time of Sabbath – of rest

and stillness and preparation. Spring is a time when new life springs forth. In this, we get a glimpse of resurrection. Just as creation groans, we too sense a longing in our hearts as we await an ending of the cycle and the arrival of abundant, everlasting life in God's kingdom. In this season, we wait with anticipation and with hope.

In Romans 8, verses 22 and 23, Paul puts it this way: *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies"*. We wait with anticipation and with hope because we know the end of the story, we know the promise that one day God will make all things new.

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation but we ourselves..."

Romans 8: 22-23

"... who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies".

Romans 8: 22-23

Looking for New Life

We do know this promise and we hold to this hope, but sometimes, if we are honest, we can get stuck in the basement, can't we? It happens in many ways and at all times. The most common "basement talk" I hear usually revolves around our young people. Kids today, huh? Cell phones, sex and alcohol and drugs, bullying. Except the cell phones and maybe some of the drugs, it was all there when I was a kid. It was probably all there when you were a kid too. Yes, in general, there is probably too much time spent on cell phones and computers and video gaming. And, yes, some kids drink and smoke and engage in sexual activity. And, yes, certainly there is bullying that happens every day in our schools. I do not deny or condone any of this or in any way mean to negate the

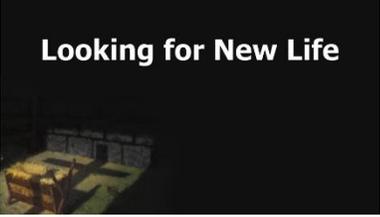
negative impact that these things have on the lives of our young people. But it is certainly not all winter out there either.

Here is a picture of our middle school MYF after the scavenger food drive they did this November, just a few weeks ago. They collected over 350 items that all went to the Thrift Store Food Bank. Here is a picture of our high school MYF at the Elder Inn last year decorating cookies with the residents. They spent the evening



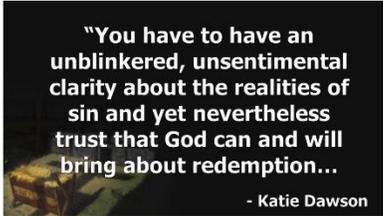
decorating and eating way too many sugar cookies, chatting with the residents the whole time. The high school MYF is going to the Manor next Wednesday – you know – sharing the love. And this is just a small sampling of the great things happening between the young people at our church and those out in the community. Expand the circle a little bit and you will find lots of young people doing some pretty wonderful things in our world.

If we expand the age range, we find people from our church and other churches reaching out in love to those in our communities that are in need of experiencing God's love. Thanksgiving and Christmas meals are prepared and served to those in need. Fudge and other treats are given to those at the jail. Turkeys and hams and all the fixings will be given to many people and families so that they can have a nice meal this holiday season. Christmas Shoeboxes will go to hundreds and hundreds of children throughout our area and state and in many other states as well. There is no shortage of hope and love and promise and new life budding all around us.



Looking for New Life

Fudge is made, meals are served, food is given out, shoeboxes are distributed because there is sin and brokenness and poverty in our community and in our world. It is to those living in these situations and circumstances that we, the people of God, are called. As people of faith, we are evangelists – charged with sharing the good news in hope that people repent of the sins in their lives and turn to Jesus Christ for salvation. As evangelists, we hold fast to the idea that God is not finished with anyone yet. At times we too experience the labor pains that Paul was talking about in Romans 8. This happens whenever we journey with someone who is new to the faith, helping them to question and grow and to get back up after they falter. This happens whenever we walk with someone through addiction and into recovery, encouraging them and supporting them and also picking them up when they fall. As our Advent study author Katie Dawson writes, *"You have to have an unblinkered, unsentimental clarity about the realities of sin and yet nevertheless trust that God can and will bring about redemption. We must trust that ultimately the forces of sin, evil, and death have no power in our lives. And we trust that a child has been born in Bethlehem so that creation itself will be set free from slavery and decay"*.



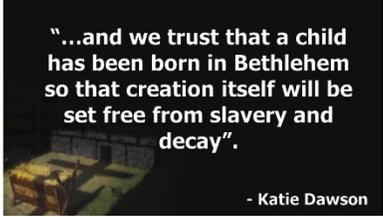
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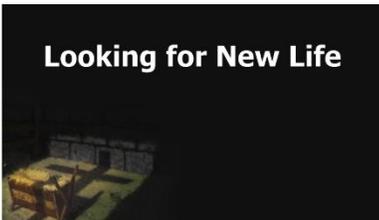
"...and we trust that a child has been born in Bethlehem so that creation itself will be set free from slavery and decay".

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Dawson goes on, a couple of pages later, on page 25 to write, *"At the winter solstice our ancestors turned to practices that cultivated hope in the midst of their fear. During Advent we turn to Christ, the hope we long for, and wait His*

coming once again". As we wait and hope, we share our faith with those new to the faith, with those returning to the faith at this time of year, and with those searching for hope and rescue and salvation. As we seek to share our faith with those in need of a Savior, we ourselves draw close to the kingdom of God. As we draw close, look deep – we may just see the face of God in those we love and serve.

Looking for New Life



Look carefully this Advent, because you can't help but participate in the coming kingdom of new life. Welcome to Advent, a season to celebrate signs of new life. Yes, one day Jesus will return in glory, *"coming in a cloud with power and great glory"*, as our passage today reminded us, but do not miss out on Jesus in the here and now. Do not miss the signs of hope and new life that are budding right now. Do not miss the places where His love is being revealed and shared even now. Do not miss the many ways that care and hope are being brought into people's lives this Advent season. But be careful – or you might find yourself being drawn into it. Be careful, or you might find yourself a part of the building of the kingdom right here and now. Be careful. I heard someplace that God can be an addiction, an obsession. If so, I hope and pray for you as you find your place and role in God's plan, becoming one who is ever sharing God's love and light and hope and care and grace with others. May it be so. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Where are the signs of the kingdom budding in our community? How can you help foster that growth?
- 2) Pray for the light, for Jesus Christ, to be made known to the lost and the broken in our communities.
- 3) How do we include others to be a part of the new kingdom so that they too can experience the hope that it brings?