

First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2009, Year C

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Luke 21:25-31

"Are You Ready?"

First - let me say "Happy New Year!" It is the first Sunday of Advent and we begin a new liturgical church year – moving from year B to year C in the Sunday lectionary, and from year 1 to year 2 in the Daily Lectionary. We begin a season of preparation – the season of Advent. The Advent wreath is lit and many will sit at their dinner tables today and light their own Advent wreaths; a great time of year and a great time of anticipation.

Speaking of anticipation – have you ever gotten a song stuck in your mind and you can't figure out why? It seems to follow you and not let go. You keep hearing the melody over and over again in your head. Don't worry – I am not talking about that song with the catsup – by Carly Simon – "Anticipation." Although that will probably be running around some of your heads later today – and for that I am sorry! No, the song I keep thinking of came out in 1970 – it was a great tune – by a band called Pacific Gas and Electric. There is the longer album version and then there is the shorter "hit" or "top 40" version that got all of the regular radio airplay. The funny thing is not everybody caught the meaning of the words – or even paid attention to them, for that matter. Many people could be found singing something like this:

"Are you ready to come right down?
Are you ready come to be around
Somebody's coming to take you on
And if you're ready you can just carry on!"

I am not sure how those words were heard – but compare them to the actual words that were written and sung:

"Are you ready to sit by His throne?
Are you ready not to be alone?
Somebody's coming to take you home
And if you're ready then He'll carry you home."

Remember this was played all over regular - secular radio! Jesus said in all three synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke: *"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."* (Mark 7:16) This is a perfect example of something being right within earshot – but it was missed – by many in a big way. Here was a huge hit song being played on radios all over the world – and the meaning was not heard – except by a few – of the second coming of Jesus Christ. In today's Gospel Jesus tells us that there will be signs – and nations will be confused!

Jesus tells us that we can have hope in the midst of difficult times. The signs are all around us: wars, uncertain financial times, and natural disasters, people seriously worried by the events that are happening around them. With all this going on, people often feel that they have no control in their lives, no way to steer their ship out off of the sandbar and into the safety of the deep harbor. Jesus tells us that we can stand firm and hold up our heads. Yes, there are signs around us, but they don't need to make us fearful, as they make other people fearful. The signs lead, not to the end, but to the beginning. The signs lead, not to destruction, but to our complete wholeness. God's salvation is at hand! We are called to stand firm in the Lord!

You know – there are many signs all around us – and a lot of them can be confusing. I decided to examine some of the actual physical signs outside many churches – proclaiming what is going on inside. Listen to these:

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- Where will you be sitting in eternity? Smoking or Non-smoking? (they must know Bishop Atwood – from his sermon 2 weeks ago)
- Try Jesus – if you don't like Him- the devil will always take you back!
- The wages of sin is death – repent before pay day!
- Don't let your worries kill you – let the church help!
- If God is your co-pilot – SWITCH SEATS!
- Prevent truth decay – brush up on your Bible!
- We use duct tape to fix everything – God used 3 nails.
- Be fishers of men: you catch them – He will clean them!
- Get out of Facebook and get into MYBOOK – God.

Each one of these signs is open to its own interpretation; each one requires its own investigation to find out the truth behind each sign.

All kidding aside – the Bible is full of signs pointing to Our Lord's coming again and how these signs will be treated by the world. Jesus foretold of wars, diseases, famines, and earthquakes as well as an increase of religious cults and false teachers in Matthew 24. He also told us how we would be seen by others: *"you will be hated by all nations because of My name."*

(Matthew 24:9) The Apostle Paul warns us in his second letter to Timothy: *"For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."*

(2 Timothy 3:2-4) He continues later in the letter: *"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."* (2 Timothy 4:3-4) All we have to do is look at the fine job that we have done with the birth of Jesus – and the myths that have become more important to the world than the simple babe in the manger! Trees and Santa's and sleighs – oh my! The moral LAW – the Ten Commandments – how we are to act toward God and how we are to act towards others – is being totally ignored – and is in some cases banned from display. The Apostle Peter warns in 2 Peter: *"In the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming?"* (2 Peter 3:3-4) I could go on and on. The signs are everywhere!

And isn't it true that Jesus tells us very plainly that we are to expect incredible signs? In today's Holy Gospel from Luke 21 Jesus says: *"when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

(Luke 21:28) We are called to have hope instead of fear. The signs that are happening around us are not supposed to make us lose heart, but to be strengthened in our walk of faith. In the midst of the heavens and earth being shaken, we can rejoice in the Lord. We can endure these times, as unpleasant and downright atrocious as they may be, because we have a God who will see us through it all. We have a God who will not abandon us in the midst of the roaring of the sea, but will be coming with *"power and great glory."* (Luke 21:27) We suffer these times, because we do not suffer them alone. We can stand firm in the midst of the signs, because our salvation is at hand – our redemption is drawing near! Right after today's Gospel Jesus continues to describe His coming again. In His description Jesus encourages us, *"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."* (Luke 21:36)

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Jesus instructs us to prepare; to be ready. During this season of Advent, we are to prepare for the coming of Jesus. This morning during Children's Education Ministry – (Sunday School) the children are preparing Chrismon symbols or signs for the Chrismon tree that is at the top of the stairs – to help them to prepare for Jesus' birth and His coming again. And how do we prepare? We repent, we pray, and we stay in His Word. Let me share with you something that people of this Church have done in helping others to prepare for the coming of Jesus. (Hold up Advent Devotional) The Teachers, leaders, and staff of C.E.M. (Sunday School) along with the Clergy of St. Bart's have written devotions and prayers for each of the days of Advent – based on the daily lectionary readings. A copy of this devotional is available – one per family, please, after this service in a beautifully decorated basket - on the table in Fr. Amend Hall. Included in this Advent Devotional is information about an Advent Wreath - and a suggestion that as you gather at your table and light the Advent candle each evening – that you use the devotion and prayer for that day – preparing as a family for Christ's coming. There are also some fun family Advent activities included on page 3. Please consider taking one home for your family this Advent. Indeed, Jesus tells us to watch, to wait for He is coming. He is coming this Christmas and coming again at the end of time to redeem the whole world. He is coming to claim those who know Him and belong to Him.

Advent is the season of hope, and the season of repentance. If you notice – the colors of our vestments and the veil and burse on the altar have changed for the season of Advent. Last week we wore white for Christ the King Sunday, and the previous weeks we wore green for the season of Pentecost. We will be wearing purple for the next four weeks as we are preparing the way of the Lord – filled with hope, expectation, anticipation and repentance, all the while we will look forward to changing to white on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day – celebrating the birth of our King. We need to get ready! We need to start right now – for when Jesus comes again – it will be “ready or not!”

In the chaos of this world; in the tumult of life; in the brokenness we all feel, we need to remember that there is hope. There is hope because Jesus is coming; we remember His coming as a babe to redeem this world. We look forward to His coming again at the end of time to finish His act of redemption. Today's Old Testament lesson from the Prophet Zechariah also should fill believers with encouragement – as the promise of the Messiah's coming – His return to the Mount of Olives- from where He ascended to the Father in Acts chapter 1. His brightness will give us all the light we need – and there will be no night – as living waters will flow. He will reign as King on that day; King over all the earth. We have nothing to fear – for we know Him! We should be looking forward to that day – with great anticipation.

What an awesome prayer the Apostle Paul gave to us that we heard this morning in our New Testament lesson from 1 Thessalonians 3, filled with hope and encouragement: *“Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.”* (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13)

My brothers and sisters in Christ – in closing this morning I want to ask you the question that we began with:

“Are you ready to sit by His throne?
Are you ready not to be alone?
Somebody's coming to take you home
And if you're ready then He'll carry you home.”