

Grace and peace from the one that was, the one that is and the one that is yet to come. Amen.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It is an exciting time of year with the sanctuary decorated for our celebrations. We celebrate because God is coming toward us: in the past in the life of Jesus; in the present in word and sacrament; and in the future, even if there is disaster, in everlasting life. Each Sunday during Advent we add to the festive atmosphere when a family lights a candle on the Advent wreath and then the candle in the middle on Christmas Eve. This Sunday we light the first candle on our Advent wreath, which is circular and represents God's infinite love for us and symbolizes hope. All of candles also represent "the light of God coming into the world through the birth of Jesus Christ."

Advent begins along with the year-long reading from the gospel of Luke. We look forward to the celebration of Jesus' first coming to the world in the light of a text that promises his final coming. We now live in the meantime, a time between these two "advents" of Jesus. Advent is a special time of year when we focus on our expectations and readiness in this meantime, the time between. In this time of expectant waiting and preparation we celebrate the first coming at the birth of Christ at Christmas and the second the coming of Christ in the clouds with power and great glory. Just like the signs given to the shepherds at Christ's birth there will be signs Luke tells of his coming again with the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth with distress among nations which will be confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. Folks will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. These are the birth pains Jesus talked about.

We know when the first coming occurred but when will the second coming happen? Multiple people have predicted the end of the world, one even referring to the Aztec calendar to determine that date and there are certain groups who live in fear at that date nears. Folks will tell us they used Scripture and dates to determine the end of the world and when that date doesn't happen some say their calculations were wrong so they make a new prediction only to be wrong again. Jesus tells us even he or the

angels do not know, only his Father. Many people are scared of the end times with the natural disasters but it is not a time to worry but rather a time for great joy. When we see these things happening we know the return of Christ is near and we can look forward to his reign of bringing us restoration and justice the same way the fig tree will sprout leaves.

Never mind the bible is not a math book but a love story. A love story that gives us hope regardless of what scary things may happen. Jesus tells us to be on guard and alert so the end does not surprise us. This is a love story, a story of how a loving, graceful God comes to live with us and does something we cannot do for ourselves. We do not claim Christ but Christ claims us. We cannot save ourselves. but Christ saves us. If we are condemned by the law we have no hope but because of our belief in Christ we are open to God's unconditional love and grace where our sins are forgiven and we can have eternal life. That is our salvation. Eternal life. There is great hope where Son of Man saves us from any destruction.

In the meantime, especially during the Holiday Season, it is easy with all of the business to become distracted and lose sight of the promises of Jesus and to not be ready for Christ's return. Extra daily tasks and routines can lull us into a kind of apathy. When things seem to be going ok, we can ignore our spiritual needs. That is why we distribute daily devotionals to everyone and to family. Spending even a small amount of time during Advent can have us focus on our spiritual lives. That is why we are asking for contributions for Good Gifts like we did last year. The ELCA Good Gifts program is a program that helps us to focus on our spiritual lives. These gifts bring about life-giving resources to people around the world living in poverty. We ask ourselves: How is the reign of God made known through those ministries? What might those who are served by these ministries hope for or eagerly await in their lives? As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), we believe that God is calling us into the world – together. And with generous, loving hands, we can make a difference. ELCA Good Gifts provides more than 50 different gift-giving options that grow the church, fight hunger and transform lives. How is the reign of God made

known through those ministries? What might those who are served by these ministries hope for or eagerly await in their lives? We bring folks hope in the name of Christ.

We all have struggles, we have all been humiliated at one time or another, we have all been afraid of one thing or another, and we have all had our setbacks, and disappointments which can cause us to lose hope and fall into despair. But rather than feeling beaten down or defeated by the struggles of this world, instead we “stand up and raise our heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Instead of despair there is hope. Instead of death there is life. Instead of hopelessness there is hope. Covid has caused our lives to change. We hear daily how many have tested positive, been hospitalized and die because of Covid. We make the best of this as we collect household goods for those coming here from Afghanistan and continue to feed people in the community in spite of this pandemic.

Remember, Jesus says that there will be signs, signs of new life and growth, such as the sprouting of a leaf on a fig tree in the summertime. If we pay attention these signs that are perceptible to us here and now they help us know that God’s kingdom is coming. Yes, many people are scared of the end times with the natural disasters but it is not a time to worry but rather a time for great joy. When we see these things happening we know the return of Christ is near and we can look forward to his reign of bringing us restoration and justice the same way the fig tree will sprout leaves.

In fact, these remind us that in Jesus, God’s kingdom has already come near, and Jesus’ words will not pass away until this kingdom has fully come. We should live with our eyes focused on today’s signs that demonstrate God’s reign and trust that Jesus’ redemption of the world will one day be complete.

That is good news. Amen.