

December 1, 2024 – Luke 21:25-36

The 17th English theologian Thomas Fuller once wrote, “It is always darkest just before the day dawns.” And that quote, or some variation of it, has become a widely used proverb. It has been used by Martin Luther King Jr, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thomas Jefferson, Bob Dylan, and Winston Churchill, just to name a few. It resonates with us.

“It is always darkest just before the day dawns.” When things are at their very worst, that is when they are most likely to improve. When the situation is absolutely bleak and hopeless, don't give up. The day may only be minutes from dawning. Persevere. Don't lose heart. It's not over yet.

It's easy to say, but harder to do. Because when you're in the midst of suffering, every moment feels like it lasts forever. When you're surrounded by heartache or despair, a proverb like this can simply feel trite and idealistic. Naive optimism, without evidence or reason.

So it might come as some surprise that this is essentially the message that Jesus gives us in our Gospel lesson today. And, as you might expect, when Jesus says it, it is not trite or idealistic or naive optimism. But if we're not careful, we might be ready to dismiss it as such.

This passage comes from Luke 21, which is the very last chapter of Luke before the Last Supper and the events of Good Friday. And in this chapter, Jesus gives a series of prophecies. Prophecies about his own coming crucifixion and resurrection, about the future of Jerusalem and those living there, and about the end times. Essentially, he is preparing his disciples for what is to come after he is gone, briefly, in the tomb, and for a much longer period of time, after his ascension.

And after warning them about the destruction that will occur in Jerusalem in the near future, he goes on to tell them about the end times events that we read today. That there will be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars. The roaring of the waves and sea will put entire nations into distress and perplexity. People will faint with fear and foreboding when all the powers of the heavens are shaken.

It will be a very dark time. A time of suffering. A time of heartache and despair. But, it is always darkest just before the day dawns. Because Jesus is coming. And the worse things are, the closer he is to arriving.

And when things are at their very worst, as bad as they can get, then you will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Then you should straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. And a new day is dawning upon all creation.

It's a wonderful message, but like I said, to someone who is seriously suffering, it might sound a bit trite. Because it can seem like Jesus is just dismissing the seriousness of our pain. Like he's just brushing it under the rug. “Yeah, things are bad. And they're gonna get worse. And it's gonna be absolutely awful. But it doesn't matter, because then it will be over.”

OK, yeah, it's good that it will be over. I'm certainly happy to know that all this pain and suffering won't go on forever. That the night will end and a new day will dawn. That's certainly good news. But what about us, right now, in the thick of it? Surrounded by darkness and unsure how many more hours there are until that day dawns? Doesn't Jesus have any words of comfort or guidance for us?

Actually, yes, he does. And that's the second half of this passage. Which begins with a parable. A parable about a fig tree. And it's kind of ironic that we're reading this parable right now, at the very beginning of winter, after our very first snow fall. Because in this parable, it is not the beginning of winter. It is the end of winter. The end of a very long, cold winter. Where everything is brown and dead and you just want to see some sign of life.

And then, you look at this fig tree, and you see a leaf. It's just one green leaf. But that single leaf fills you with hope. Because if this fig tree is growing leaves, then the winter must be over. Summer is near. One leaf on one fig tree may be a very small thing, but it signifies so much more.

Now, you might read this and assume that Jesus is talking about the signs of the end times again. And he is, sort of. But it's different than the previous signs he's talked about it. It's not a sign of fear and destruction, like the those in the sun, moon, and stars, in the sea and waves, in the shaking of the heavens. No, this is a sign of life.

Moreover, it's a sign that the disciples themselves will see. It's a sign that this generation – the generation of the disciples – will witness. And yet, it's also a sign that points to the end times. So what in the world is Jesus talking about here. What is the fig tree?

Well, to sum it up, Jesus is the fig tree. His own resurrection is the new leaf that the disciples will see. His own resurrection is a sign of the end times.

We don't usually think about the end times like that. There's been 2,000 years since Jesus' resurrection and the end still hasn't come. Yet, from Jesus' perspective, his resurrection was the beginning of the end. It was the beginning of Satan's defeat. It was the beginning of our freedom from sin. It was the beginning of death's death.

His resurrection was one new leaf on a single fig tree, but it's a sign of what's to come. It's a sign of the end of winter. It's a sign that the night is ending.

And yeah, there's still a lot of suffering in this world. But at least we know what we're working towards. We know what the day will bring, when night finally ends. We know that the suffering we've endured and the deaths we grieved will be completely undone. We won't just be comforted in our pain and sadness. We'll be restored. We'll be resurrected. Death will be undone.

We know it will happen because we've already seen it happen. There's already a leaf on the fig tree. Christ is risen. We just need to be patient. We just need to persevere to the end.

Which is Jesus' second message in this passage. It's not a parable this time. It's actually one of Jesus' more blunt words of exhortation. But it's a different message than we might expect.

Because after all these words of warning about the suffering and fear of the end times and what we'll have to endure, you might think that Jesus would warn us about falling away due to pain and misery. That the despair and sadness of a broken world nearing it's end would overwhelm us with doubt and unbelief. But that's not the caution he gives.

No, what he warns us about are things like dissipation, drunkenness, and the cares of life. Now, if you don't know what dissipation is, you're not alone. It's a fairly archaic word. It means something along the lines of wastefulness. Indulgence. Any distracting form of pleasure. In fact, drunkenness itself is a form of dissipation.

Basically, what Jesus tells us is that the greatest threat that Christians will face is not suffering itself, but the worldly ways that we try to avoid suffering. The sinful ways that we try to distract ourselves from suffering. The immoral ways that we try to forget about our suffering.

Whether its the well known vices of sex and drugs and alcohol, or simply the cares of life – the silly little things we do to escape from life's pain and heartache – Jesus warns us that these do not make our suffering easier. In fact, they make it quite a bit harder. We think they lessen the load, but in reality, they weigh down your heart even more.

Why? Well, for two reasons. The first, Jesus gives right here. They so distract and blind you to what's going on around you, that when Jesus does come, it's a complete surprise. For those weighed down by dissipation, drunkenness, and the cares of life, Christ's return will come upon them like a trap. Now, I don't know about you, but I've never thought of falling into a trap as a good thing. This is a pretty strong warning.

But the second reason, is because he uses that phrase: “lest your hearts be weighed down.” And that's a phrase that is always used about the work of sin and the Law. God's Law weighs us down. Guilt and shame weigh us down. Our slavery to sin weighs us down.

The Gospel never weighs us down. Christ's yoke is easy. His burden is light. His work on the cross takes the weight of sin off our shoulders. Dissipation, drunkenness, and the cares of life weigh down our hearts. But repentance and the good news of Christ's death and resurrection frees us from sin and the Law.

Advent is a time of preparation for Christ's coming. His first coming, at Christmas. And his second coming, on the last day. And as Christ says at the end of this passage, to be prepared for his second coming is to stay awake at all times. To stay awake until the darkness of night is over and a new day dawns.

And to do that, we need to pray for strength. Strength to escape all these things that are taking place. Escape them, not by turning to the sinful pleasures of this world and not by becoming distracted by the cares of life. No, we escape them by turning to the one who brings us a new dawn. Who brings us new life after a long winter. Who brings us his words that will never pass away.

We turn to Christ and we find the end of our suffering. The end of our despair. The end of death itself. We find our resurrection in his resurrection. And we find the strength to live another day. Amen.