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Luke 21:25-36

OUR LORD'S COMING IS MARKED BY SIGNS

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Do you pay attention to signs? I certainly hope so. Signs are there to get our attention and point us to something. The dictionary definition is "a notice publicly displayed for advertising purposes or for giving direction or warning." Think about that for a second. It is a notice publicly displayed. It is something that is out in the open, People can see it. People are supposed to see it. It is supposed to get your attention. Some signs are there to give direction. We are to come to a complete stop. We are going to take a right turn. We are going to have to take a detour from the usual route because of road construction. We might be looking for a gas station or a certain restaurant or a rest area. We will get a notice that one is only two miles ahead and we can prepare to stop. Signs are also there to warn us. I would certainly hope that we would pay attention to a sign that tells us that the bridge is out.

We have entered into a new church year this morning. Today is the first Sunday in Advent. As most of you know, the word Advent means coming. We look forward to the coming of our Lord Jesus as a child at Christmas. We also look forward to his coming in glory at the end of the world as he will raise all the dead and judge all people. Finally we look forward to our Lord's coming as he teaches us and feeds our faith in Word and Sacrament. The first Sunday in Advent reminds us to keep watch as our Lord Jesus will surely return. Today we see that OUR LORD'S COMING IS MARKED BY SIGNS.

Advent is a time of penitence and preparation. The world will laugh at this. Oh, we will hear about preparation, but it really isn't all that important in the grand scheme of things. We are told to buy our presents and put up our tree and other decorations and bake cookies and send cards and other things, but we really don't hear about preparing our hearts for the coming of our Lord. Many people have no idea that the Lord Jesus is returning to judge the world. They don't see the signs that Jesus gave to prepare us for that coming.

We need to prepare our hearts. Advent is a time when we are to reflect upon our sins and see how we have offended a just and a holy go. God's holy Law demands nothing less than absolute perfection from each and every one of us. Unfortunately none of us can live up to that demand no matter how hard we try. Even if we keep the entire Law and offend in just one point we are guilty of breaking all of it. The answer will never be found with us. It can only be found with God.

God in his love promised a Savior already in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve rebelled against him. Throughout the years God would repeat that promise and give his people more details of what that Savior would be like. They were to observe the signs. In our Old Testament reading this morning we hear that he would be descended from the royal line of King David, a line that had seemingly died out. That Savior would bring justice and righteousness to the nations by bringing his righteousness to us. God himself would become one of us and live the perfect life that we were unable to live. He would be called the LORD Our Righteousness. There were many more signs to mark him as the Messiah.

We often wonder how long this world will exist. We see the evil out there. It seems to be getting worse. We often ask, "How long, O Lord?" We aren't alone. Jesus' disciples asked the very same thing as they saw how their

master was treated. They had just entered Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover festival. They did not want to go there. They knew what the religious leaders thought of Jesus. They wanted Jesus dead. Throughout that week they had laid traps for Jesus, hoping to catch Jesus in his own words, looking for a reason to kill him.

The apostles were looking for answers and Jesus would give them to them. They wanted to know when this world would come to an end. Jesus would give them some general signs. He told them that there would be wars and rumors of wars. This world would not be the utopia of peace that some claim when we'll all hold hands and sing songs. There will always be evil men like Hitler and Stalin and ISIS. There will be false prophets deceiving many people. They will tell people that there are many ways to God and to heaven. Jesus may be one, he may not be. They will tell people that this world will always exist and that Judgment Day is just some made up myth. And they will deceive many! There will also be natural disasters: floods, famines and earthquakes. And God's people will be persecuted. People will not put up with the truth. They will try to silence it any way that they can because darkness does not want to be exposed by the light. Satan's lies cannot stand before the One who is the Truth. Christians will be arrested and put into prisons. They will have their property confiscated. Some will even be put to death. And all of this is going on throughout the world!

But you will say that these same things are true of every age since the apostles. It doesn't matter whether you lived in the first century or the fifteenth or the 21st. The same things apply. But there are more signs to observe. There will be signs in the heavenly bodies: the sun, moon and stars. The very laws of nature will seem to be changed. What exactly does this mean? Isaiah had prophesied, "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken." When this happens, the laws of gravity will also be affected. The waters of the sea will shake and roar in ways that have never been seen and heard before. The chaos that existed before the creation of the world will return. Scientists will be stumped coming up with a plausible explanation. Those who point to the Scriptures will continue to be mocked. No science fiction writer can come up with a more frightening picture than this one. The peoples on earth will be confused and frightened. They won't know where to turn.

We can imagine the fear and terror on people's faces as these things happen, especially those who have mocked and denied the Christian faith. All the atheists who deny or question the existence of God will have a different story now. Those who have invested everything they have into the things of this world will find that all their investments are now worthless as they have neglected the one thing needful. They will be absolutely terrified and they will try to run and hide as Judgment Day approaches.

"At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." All peoples on earth will see Jesus as he returns. This time he is not coming in humility with his glory hidden behind a manger bed or the garb of a servant or a shameful death on a cross. This time he is coming with the full glory of the Son of God with all the holy angels with him. We cannot imagine what a glorious sight that will be!

For God's people this is what we have been waiting for. This is the sum of our hope, our belief. This is what we have prayed for when we pray, "Thy kingdom come!" The kingdom of God is here now but this is the full realization of that kingdom. Now we are the Church Militant, fighting in a sinful world. Now comes the Church Triumphant when all the enemies of God will be destroyed and all the faithful will receive the full promises that Jesus had given to us.

We will not be afraid. We will not fear. We know that all our sins have been removed by Christ's holy, precious blood and by his innocent suffering and death. We know that Jesus has given us the vey robe of his own righteousness to wear. Therefore our posture will be very different. While others will be cowering in fear, we will stand up and lift up

our heads. Our redemption is drawing near. While the hardest human hearts are quaking with a fear that they had never dreamed possible, we will look up with confidence. We know what this means. We know that God is fulfilling his promise. We know that we will now receive the full consummation of eternal life.

We know the signs of the changing of the seasons. When we see the leaves turn colors and fall to the ground, we know that winter is coming. When we see leaves returning to the trees and the grass greening up, we know that summer is coming. The winter of this world's existence will be over and God's glorious kingdom will be seen in its entirety. God is in complete control. This is an important reminder to us. We want to be in control at all times. Yet we know that many things in life are beyond our control. We feel helpless. That is why we must always look to our Lord. He is always there with us here and now. The day is surely coming when everything will be exactly as it must be.

"Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Some people are troubled by these words. What does "this generation" mean? It certainly can't mean the same people that were living when Christ spoke these words. They surely died. Very simply, it means the same kind of people who despised and rejected him. The enemies of God will continue to exist on this earth until the final Day of Judgment.

Further comfort for us is that even though everything in this world will pass away, the Word of our Lord will not pass away. We think of all the attempts of Christ's enemies to eradicate Christianity from the Roman persecutions to communism to radical Islam. Yet they will all fail. "The Word still stands the Christian's trust while haughty empires lie in dust."

Finally our Lord issues a warning to all of us. It is possible to fall from faith. Satan and his evil forces will always be working on us. The things of this world will always be enticing. We can grow impatient with the Lord. We cannot allow our own sinful desires to gain control over our lives. There are many people who live their lives as though life was one giant party. There are times when we are tempted to join in. We don't want to fall into that trap.

"Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man." We don't run from Jesus. We run toward him. He strengthens our weak faith by giving us his Word and Sacrament. They are the Means of Grace where God comes to us.

Jesus is surely coming again. He has given us enough signs to prepare for that coming. It may well be today. May he find us ready and prepared! AMEN.