

“Prepare for Prayer”

Luke 21: 25-36

1st Sunday in Advent—December 2, 2012

CCUMC

Melanie Dobson Hughes

Introduction (before song and scripture)

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and the beginning of the new church year. Happy New Year! We enter now into cycle C in the lectionary, and in cycle C the gospel lessons focus on Luke. We start though, not at chapter 1 in Luke, but at chapter 21 near the end of the book. We start with Luke’s vision of the coming of Jesus again. The first Sunday in Advent always places an emphasis on the cosmic signs portending the coming redemption of Christ at the end of time. Advent, or *adventus*, means coming, and this text on the first Sunday ushers us into coming of Christ—not long ago in a stable at Bethlehem—but rather the future coming of Jesus, in-breaking into our world.

Christians sometimes forget that we do have a hope of Christ coming again, though it is a significant motif throughout the New Testament. Each of the synoptic gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—have a discourse on Christ coming again, as well as the epistles of Paul (1 Cor, 1 and 2 Thessalonians), and of course, Revelation. As our confirmands learned a couple of weeks ago, the word for Revelation in Greek is “apocalypse.” This kind of biblical literature in our text for today, with signs, wonders, and visions of the world to come, is considered “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic literature offers hope and assurance to people in the midst of suffering; it is to be read and heard with the imagination, with eyes and ears open to new ways of envisioning life.

Before we read the scripture today, and for every Sunday in Advent, we will sing the Taize chant “Prepare the Way”. The chant opens us to a vision of preparing to see Christ in our lives now, not just long ago in a manger. Every sermon in this series over the four

weeks in Advent will focus on preparation in some way; today it is to Prepare with Prayer. As we sing today, we offer the chant over and over again, until it becomes a prayer. The hope today is that the chant can be an avenue as well to open our ears to hearing today's apocalyptic scripture text with imagination and hope.

***Sing "Prepare the Way of the Lord"**

***Reading of Luke 21: 25:36**

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life. . . Be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength." The worries of this life. . . a long time ago a popular reggae song came out proclaiming, "Don't worry, be happy." Do you remember it. (hum the tune) It's a bouncy tune, and it does make your spirits lift a little. Yet, at the same times, it reminds us that we are worried about something; it just puts worry in our brains. Commands in the negative often do that. "Don't worry—oh yeah, that's right, I'm worrying."¹ I've learned in parenting education that it is best to refrain from stating commands in the negative. If you tell a toddler, "don't touch the hot stove!" they almost then feel compelled to touch. (act out toddler trying to touch) Instead you state in the positive what you want them to do, "You may look in the oven window at what is cooking."

I'm wondering now, since I've mentioned "don't worry", how many of you might indeed be thinking about your worries. Do we have any worry warts here? Are any of you worrying about something or someone in your life? (invite show of hands)

Then here we have this apocalyptic text about Christ's coming. Here we have something else to worry about—distress among nations, the roaring sea, the passing away of heaven and earth. Great. As if the worry warts among us needed anything else!

¹ Brian Stoffregen, "CrossMarks Christian Resources" accessed on November 26, 2012.

Looking closely at the text though, there is positive affirmation—stating the positive of what to do-- for disciples who follow Christ. “When these things happen,” the text says, “stand up and raise up your heads, because your redemption is near.” This word ‘redemption,’ or *apolytroxis* in Greek, means deliverance. Christ’s coming again means deliverance for the faithful. It means, as our Taize chant said, “that we will see our salvation coming from God.”

So if you are feeling faint with fear and foreboding, if you are in a worrisome time in life right now, if loved ones are imperiled or death looms close or disease holds you in its grip, or your future appears dark, or if you stand in desperate need of the miraculous, the coming of the Son of Man means salvation, or deliverance, happens. Poet W.H. Auden penned in his work *For the Time Being* that “nothing can save us that is possible: we who must die demand a miracle.” That is what the gospel offers us—a real miracle, “an impossible possibility, a reality that transcends the everyday real, a Truth deeper than all else we have been told is true, a story that stretches beyond and encompasses all our stories [and all our worries] so as to give them meaning, integrity, and purpose.”² The coming of the Son of Man with power and great glory reminds us that this is still a God-ordered world. This is still a world where God’s word doesn’t pass away, where redemption, where deliverance draws very near into our lives. This apocalyptic text, with all its strange language and visions, offers to us hope—even to the greatest worrier among us.

After our text for the day offers to us this grand story of miraculous redemption, it moves to tell us NOT “Don’t worry”, but to be on guard against worrying, for it weighs us down. Worrying keeps us from the fullness of life, and leaves us unprepared to welcome Christ into our hearts. If we are always worried, we don’t have space to welcome in the

² David Lose, “Reflections on the Lectionary-Luke 21: 25-36” workingpreacher.org accessed on November 26, 2012.

miracle of our salvation. We dissipate our strength and our life into fear of what might actually never happen.

Instead, as any good parent, God's word to us gives us something else to do rather than worry; God states in the positive what we are to do. We are to "keep alert, praying at all times for strength." Such prayer then depends upon God--for God to be with us to meet all of life's challenges, to meet our fears, our forebodings, our darkness-es. Prayer gives strength for all things. When we truly prepare the way of our lives with prayer, we can face whatever is before us.

Meister Eckhardt, a great Christian mystic from the medieval times, embodied a life of prayer. Prayer is really opening up our hearts and our lives to the presence of God. A mystic spends all of his/her life in the presence of God, becoming one with God. In such prayer, no more space exists for worry, because we are so near to God's power and beauty. Eckhart writes in his sermon on this Lukan text, "I am as sure as I live that nothing is so near to me as God, God is nearer to me than I am to myself." By steeping his soul in God's presence, Eckhardt could then live a life free from worry, and full of the redemption of God. He writes, "the soul must be rooted and ground in God fastly, as to suffer no perturbation of fear."³ This mystic from long ago knew that praying for strength could so root the prayer in God, that worries fade in significance.

In the spirit of Meister Eckhardt and in the spirit of this visionary text, I invite us now into a space a prayer, a time of keeping alert so that we might have the strength to face all things, all worris, all forebodings, all darkness. Let us pray:

Prayers of the People

³ Meister Eckhardt, "Sermons—Luke 21" www.ccel.org (Christian classics Ethereal Library).

God who comes to us in a cloud of glory, who comes to us in a stable in Bethlehem, who comes into our lives in the very present now, who will come again to redeem us, to deliver us—we bring before you know our worries. We hold before you those things that keep us up at night, those fears that grip our heart for people we love, those forebodings that we struggle to name out loud to others. . . We offer to you these worries, and the people whom we worry over now in silent prayer. . . (silence) We trust, Lord, that you will raise up our heads, because our redemption is near. We trust that you do hold those for whom we are worried. We trust that your desire for us is to so deeply abide with you that all we know is love, rather than fear.

Out of that love, we would now offer intercessory prayer for those on our hearts and on our prayer list. Watching and waiting, we pray for this world that needs your saving power. . .