

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our lives seem circular as the seasons spin around us and the years roll by,¹ and so it is today, as we enter into another season of Advent, the start of another liturgical year. The Advent Season is a time for us to reflect, wait, and prepare our hearts and our minds for the celebration of Christ's birth as well as the return of Christ.

Today, as the Advent season rolls in, we remember and anticipate the coming of Christ in a historical sense, as seen in the nativity in Bethlehem, but we also reflect and discern this birth of Christ in a Christological sense in our hearts and what that means for us. And finally from the Gospel lesson today, we prepare our hearts and our minds for the eschatological coming or the second coming of Christ.

This is what our season of Advent means and this is what this season holds for us and this is what we will hear during these next four Sundays in our readings as we once again anticipate that glorious birth of salvation for the world, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. So as Jesus himself tells us in our Gospel today:

...stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

But before we get to this wonderful word redemption, once again we have another apocalyptic text before us in this Gospel lesson. Our First Sunday of Advent is always an apocalyptic text across our lectionary which, I believe, tends to frighten folks, close their minds, and focus more on what is more desirable or comfortable for our sensibilities. But this type of Apocalyptic literature pushes our thinking to see past our black and white worlds and pushes our concrete thinking to more metaphorical thinking in order to expand our religious imagination.

Just look out our window right now at the world, it is frightening, it is confusing, and it is divisively cynical and hateful causing us all to isolate ourselves from the fear of difference or change. But at the same time, this is the world we live in. Today's Gospel finds Jesus warning his disciples what they can expect in the future. The world will be convulsed with war and revolution. Jesus' followers will be labeled as undesirables. Families will be broken apart. And for the most part, we can attest to this today because it is as I said, the world we live in. Today when we get past our fear of the end times, Jesus promises not only to give his followers, the disciples and us, what we need in such trying times but also commissions them and us to tell the gospel story, even in time of persecution. I am inspired and very influenced by Bonhoeffer's thoughts in his treatise on ethics, concerning the world and culture when he basically says that eschatology is not a call for Christians to roll up the windows and lock the doors, it is a call to discipleship.

Two Sundays ago, we heard this same type of eschatology in the Gospel, as Jesus told of the destruction of the temple proclaiming that NOT one huge magnificent stone of the temple will not be left standing, all will be torn down. From this understanding, this type of eschatological preaching from Jesus is NOT a call to isolation, rather it is a call to discipleship within that Gospel lesson and this is what I said about it:

Our Christian faith, our Christian understanding, or our Christian ethic or piety is not the reality of one's own self, nor the reality of the world, nor is it based on or the reality of the

¹ "Circle," Chapin, Harry, *Harry Chapin Greatest Stories Live*, 1976 Elektra / Asylum Records, CD track #10

norms and values we have built and consider our temples. Our Christian faith, our Christian understanding, or our Christian ethic or piety is centered in God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and not centered in us. In Jesus Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of this world *at the same time* and not one without the other. *The reality of God is truly revealed to us when we are totally emersed in the reality of the world...* because it is within this world that we see God's true grace given in Jesus Christ.

What is it we say against all the destructive, or negative attitude we encounter in the culture around us...how do we deal with the culture today? Does Jesus call us to be even more hateful, or more rigid, or more incendiary with our attitudes and conversations? What story do we tell when confronted with unyielding negativity, divisiveness, or even the hatred? Will this feed into our interpretations of this passage and heighten all the ill feelings? How can we use this passage today to interpret the signs of our times right now? Will it lead us to negative isolation or call us to discipleship? What do we hear in this passage...is this a time of ending or beginning? Is this a time of God's forsakenness or a time of God's blessing?

I go back to Bonhoeffer on how we can interpret this passage. In his book *Ethics*, the chapter titled, *On the Possibility of the Church's Message to the World*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

It is necessary to free oneself from the way of thinking which sets out from human problems and which asks for solutions on this basis. Such thinking is unbiblical. The way of Jesus Christ, and therefore the way of all Christian thinking, leads not from the world to God but from God to the world. This means the essence of the gospel does not lie in the solution of human problems, and that the solution of human problems cannot be the essential task of the church.²

Bonhoeffer goes on to say:

The message of the church to the world can be none other than the Word of God to the world. This Word is: Jesus Christ, and salvation in this name. We do not know any other relationship of God to the world apart from Jesus Christ. Therefore, the church, too, has no relationship to the world other than through Jesus Christ. This means that the proper relationship of the church to the world does not derive from some natural law, or law of reason, or universal human rights, but solely from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.³

Jesus is teaching us today to view the world that we are a part of through the eyes of our faith and he does this with reminder of redemption and a parable about a fig tree. Jesus reminds us that no matter how bad the world seems:

²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Lue 21:28)

Our sweet redemption...not revenge, but our sweet redemption is near and we are sitting in the midst of that redemption right now. The grace we currently find ourselves in is how we are being told by Jesus to see the world.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6, *Ethics*. Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Eerst Feil, and Clifford Green, English Edition Edited by, Clifford Green, Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Chares C. West, and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, "On the Possibility of the Church's Message to the World" page 356, par 358.

³ Ibid, page 356, par 358.

This word “redemption” is a sweet word as Luther points out in his sermon on the text that is before us today. What Luther gets at is that if all these ugly things happening in our culture are distressing signs that mean *redemption* is drawing near, then let it be so. Luther goes on to say this:

Therefore, [the Lord] uses the sweet word “redemption,” which all hearts gladly hear. What is redemption? Who would not gladly be redeemed? Who would desire to remain in such a desert, both of sin and of punishment? Who would not wish an end to such misery, such danger for souls, such ruin for man—especially when Christ so sweetly allures, invites, and comforts us? (LW 75:105).

The times seemed bad to Martin Luther, back in the 1500s when he was preaching and by our thoughts and attitudes, the times seem to be just as bad. But Luther’s goal in his moving Advent sermon on our text was to not complain or focus so much on the difficult times, but to proclaim the Good News of redemption in the midst of the confusing and difficult times. No matter how awful things might be, Luther’s task as a preacher is to preach the Good News, to proclaim the Gospel, to tell of comfort for all people by reminding them and us today that redemption is drawing near, and is near in the presence of Jesus Christ.⁴

Right after Jesus tells us to stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near, he then tells a parable of the fig tree and how it is a sign of the seasons to come...but the fig tree is more than just an indication of the season according to the tone Jesus is setting up with this apocalyptic message. At the outset of the sermon I said, “this type of Apocalyptic literature pushes our thinking to see past our black and white worlds and pushes our concrete thinking to be more metaphorical in order to expand our religious imagination.” Let’s look past the concrete image of the fig tree and parse out the metaphor that it is and what it has come to mean throughout Holy Scripture.

The basic theme Moses establishes within the book of Deuteronomy, is the reaffirmation of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. And from Moses’ speech within this book of the Bible we hear this about the fig tree:

⁷ For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸ a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, (Deuteronomy 8:7-8).

The fig tree was and is among the more prominent trees of Palestine...it’s literal presence is a blessing and the absence of the fig tree is considered to be a curse. The fig tree is the only tree mentioned by name in the garden of paradise. And from this tree Adam and Eve covered the nakedness of their sin.

⁴ This Quote from Luther along with my comments about it are blended with Rev. Gregory Fryer’s comments, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church New York, New York in his preparation for Advent 1. In that work Pastor Fryer references Luther’s sermon on this text.

Jesus is lifting this tree up with a parable because this tree's fruit is desirable just as the fruit of redemption is desirable among the chaos and confusion within an apocalyptic scene that is being set for us in this passage.⁵ From this fig tree we see more than a seasonal indication, it is a reminder here today in our Gospel lesson as it was throughout the prophets...a reminder of God's love for Israel. In the midst of the eschatological confusion, fear, and chaos stands a reminder of God's love. Likewise, for us today amidst our fear, our confusion amidst the eschatological culture we are emersed in, we gather around another tree, the cross of Jesus Christ and it's fruit is *our* sweet redemption.

Our Christian faith will not deliver us from all the mess of the culture that is around us nor will alleviate the anxiety about the future that the culture will usher in, but rather our faith teaches us that there is redemption within the world. Likewise, our faith does not command Jesus to do something, our faith is our trust that Jesus has already done something, is doing something, and will do something.

Right now, the fruit of the fig tree is redemption that is set before us in bread and wine, stand up and raise your heads, rather, open your hearts and your imagination, because today our redemption is handed to us in this modest unassuming Holy Meal...and the fruit of this meal is the assurance of grace, hope, and salvation.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵ This discussion concerning the fig tree is supported from Bernard Brandon Scott's book, *Hear Then the Parables, A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989. Part Four. Home and farm, section 16, *A Garden of Delights*, under the heading: "Under a Fig Tree" page 332.