

**SERMON TITLE:** “When God Comes”

**TEXT:** Luke 21:20-36

**PREACHED AT:** Neighbourhood Church

**BY:** Ryan Dueck

**DATE:** November 29, 2009/First Sunday of Advent

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### INTRODUCTION

Happy New Year!

The first Sunday of Advent comes near the *end* of our calendar year, but it is the first day of the Christian year. I had to pull out my new calendar this morning because the first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the Christian year!

A few weeks ago, an email came into my inbox from our MB Seminary. Attached to the email were four preaching outlines, one for each Sunday of the Advent season. For each Sunday, one of the professors had laid out some insights from the text, some historical background, and some suggestions about potential applications. I gave the four documents a very quick scan and was quite pleased. It seemed too good to be true! I filed it away, knowing I would be preaching the first Sunday of Advent, and grateful to have some of my work already done for me!

Well, on Tuesday morning I had a look at the text that I would be working with and I was a little less grateful! One of the things I had apparently missed in my initial scan of the one for the first Sunday of Advent was the *text* they had chosen for today: Luke 21:20-37. A few weeks ago we looked at the book of Revelation—a book known for its bizarre imagery and its sometimes baffling going back and forth between coded references to present empires to the end of days, etc. Well, as you’ll see, there’s some very similar apocalyptic language in our passage today!

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### CONTEXT

Before we get to the passage, let’s set the scene: we’re near the end of the gospel of Luke but right in the middle of the bigger story Luke is telling. Luke-Acts is actually one large book by the same author and it tells the story of Jesus and the rise of the early church. Jesus’ public ministry of healing and teaching and announcing the kingdom of God is mostly finished. Throughout his ministry he has repeatedly emphasized that what he is accomplishing must be done in Jerusalem. In Luke 9:51, Jesus is described as “setting his face to Jerusalem.” Jerusalem is the centre of the religious life of Jesus’ people, the Jews. It’s the city where God lives, for Jesus’ people. Jerusalem is the scene of the climax of the story Jesus is a part of.

Jesus has strong feelings for Jerusalem.

- Lament over Jerusalem: 13:31-35
- Weeping over Jerusalem: 19:41-44

So Jesus has finally made the long and winding trip from Galilee to Jerusalem and his disciples point out to him the beauty of the temple. The temple was hugely important for Jews in Jesus day. In many ways, the temple was where God was. It was where the priests were; it was where sacrifices were offered for praise, for atoning for sins, etc. The temple was where pilgrimages were made during Jewish feasts like the Passover. The temple represented the majesty of Israel's God. It was the religious and cultural centre of life for the average first century Jew.

And so when the disciples drew Jesus' attention to the temple, they probably were expecting an approving response. "Yeah, that sure is something, isn't it? What a magnificent structure, devoted to God." They may even have been imagining Jesus overthrowing the Romans, setting up shop in the temple, and getting down to the business of running the kingdom!

But that's not what they got. What they got was a lengthy prediction of the doom and destruction that was the destiny of the temple and of the entire city of Jerusalem. "Not a single stone will be left in its place!" The disciples proceed to ask Jesus about what the signs will be for the terrible events he is describing.

So this is where we pick things up in our text this morning.

### **READ: LUKE 21:20-36**

As you can see, this is not the most obvious choice of texts for Advent. I have to say, I puzzled over this one for a while this week. How do you use a text like this to introduce the Advent season?

First, it doesn't seem to have anything to do with Christmas. Our text takes place near the *end* of Jesus' life, not the beginning!

Second, the text is talking about the destruction of cities and temples, about a time of great suffering for the Jewish people, about being hauled before judges, and signs of the end of the age.

So what does *any of this* have to do with Advent?

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ADVENT = "COMING"

Well, a helpful place to start might be to talk a bit about what, exactly, Advent is and what it means.

The English word "advent" comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which simply means "coming."

Well, we are familiar with one kind of coming—this is the kind of coming we typically associate with Advent:

- Gentle Jesus meek and mild
- Emmanuel—God with us
- Jesus as God **identifying** with the human condition, coming to be with us, to walk in our shoes, to understand us, show us how to live
- The events of Christmas that we are waiting for in Advent are about God in Christ entering the human condition in order to redeem it

But there is another kind of coming as well—and Luke reminds us of it in our text this morning, Luke 21:20-36

- The Son of Man coming on the clouds
- Words like “anguish,” “fear,” “terror,” “perplexity,” “destruction,” “woe”
- Words like “power” and glory”
- Jesus as God **transforming** the way things are, judging what is sinful and false and revealing what is good and true

Two comings—one of *identification* and one of *transformation*.

Can we make sense of these two comings here, at the outset of Advent? What do they have to do with each other? I think we can, and we have to because these are both part of the gospel story. These are both important parts of what it looks like when God comes to us.

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### BABIES AND CROSSES

An image/story that gives us a picture of the two “comings” we have discussed this morning:

On Wednesday Gayle and Ruth came in to decorate the church for the Christmas season. Later in the day, Colin and I were admiring the decorating work these two ladies had done and our attention turned toward the section underneath the cross.

It was a nativity scene, with baby Jesus in a manger.

The baby we are familiar with and we are drawn to. Everybody loves a baby! Come into this church on any Sunday shortly after a baby is born and you will see everyone flock towards the newborn baby (Bobby and Arden/Glen and Natasha). Babies are cute and cuddly, they smell good!

Babies signify newness, opportunity, potential for growth and change, etc. Babies melt our hearts. Just this past week we dragged out some pictures of when Nicky and Claire were a few weeks old and the memories came flooding back. Babies stand for life and all that is good about it.

Jesus comes to us as a baby and he holds out the promise of these very things. His presence among us gives us the hope of newness, potential, growth, and life.

Jesus shows us that God thinks human beings are a good idea—that we are worth redeeming!

But getting back to the scene Colin and I saw in the foyer. The baby doll was lying on its back looking up a cross (the cross we have in our little tower).

We are drawn to babies, but we are not drawn to crosses. If babies attract us, crosses repel us. Crosses speak of judgment and cruelty and torture and blood and agony. They represent the *loss* of life, the cutting off of possibilities, the closing of doors. Crosses represent power and the abuse of power. For Christians, in particular, crosses represent the result of resisting God's plan in the name of religion! Crosses represent the apparent triumph of evil over good. Crosses stand for death.

Jesus' prediction of judgment and chaos and confusion and despair come right before the events that would lead to him being up on the cross. Right after his words about the fate of Jerusalem and his apocalyptic references to heaven and earth passing away, the plot to kill him intensifies. There is the last supper and then his arrest. Jesus is not just making wild predictions here; he knows the path that he is on and he knows where it will end up.

He also knows that this is all part of the big picture of what happens when God comes. He knows that when God comes, there is comfort and there is encouragement and hope, but that there is also division, conflict, and ultimately judgment. There is **identification** but there is also **transformation**.

Many of the events Jesus speaks about in Luke 21 were fulfilled only a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jerusalem was attacked and suffered great destruction in 70 AD. The temple was destroyed. All hell broke loose," to use Eugene Peterson's words from *The Message*.

But Jesus did not speak these words about judgment and destruction to make his followers afraid or anxious or to cause worry. He says enough in other parts of the Gospels to let us know that fear and worry are not part of what he wants for his followers.

So what did he mean for us to do? How are we to respond to a God who comes in this way?

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## TWO RESPONSES

### 1. Recognition

Obviously, the **first** thing we are to do is to make sure we are not resisting God like the temple and all it stood for in Jesus' day did in the first century. The first thing Advent tells us is that we have to make sure we're on this little baby's team!

Not everyone is.

Just like Jerusalem, in Jesus' day, many in our time refuse Jesus' summons to peace; in Luke 13 Jesus says that he longs to gather Jerusalem's children under his wings like a hen gathers her chicks, but... *you were not willing*. In Luke 19, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem as he enters it: "If you had only known what would bring you peace," he says. Already he knows Jerusalem is doomed to destruction, because they *did not recognize the time of God's coming to them* (Luke 19:44).

This was the city of God—if any place ought to have recognized what God was up to, it ought to have been Jerusalem! But they didn't recognize what was going on. Jesus wept because he saw that they were rejecting the thing they most needed—the peace only he could offer.

Making sure we're on Jesus' side isn't just about saying a prayer once upon a time to make sure "we're in."

It is about hearing that initial call and responding (as we heard in Iain's story about Alpha), but it's also about aligning ourselves with God's purposes. It's about continuing to grow in faith, hope, and love of God and neighbour. It's about continually submitting ourselves to God's purposes for our own lives and for his world. It's about being willing to embrace God's upside-down way of working in the world.

## 2. Watchfulness

But the **second** point of our passage this morning is simply to be watchful! In Luke 21:36 Jesus tells his disciples to "always be on the watch." Because Jesus will come again, and he still comes to meet us in our everyday lives. And if there's one thing the long story of the Bible makes clear is that sometimes even those who think they know God best, who should be the most in tune with his plans, can miss him.

So how are we to be watchful?

I think that one of the messages that texts like this one are meant to communicate is that as followers of Jesus we are to be people who have **bifocal vision**.

Those of you who wear bifocals will have a good idea of what I might be talking about. Bifocals have two lenses—one for distant vision, one for near vision.

I think this is good metaphor for how we are to be watchful—during Advent and throughout the year. I think most of us find the near vision to come fairly naturally. We don't often have problems seeing what's right in front of us. We have our families, and our jobs, and our kids, and our hobbies, and good causes to devote time to, church activities to be involved in... We do the best we can to live through the ordinary joys and

sorrows that come into each of our lives. We praise God for the good things, pray for strength and peace for the hard things; we lift up for the needs of others.

We live our lives, and we believe God is there with us helping and encouraging (sometimes correcting and judging) us along the way. That's the "near vision" component.

What about the distant vision?

It's keeping the big picture in mind and looking for the ways in which the big picture breaks into and transforms the smaller pictures of our lives. It's not letting the stuff in the "near vision" overwhelm the fundamental reality of who Jesus is, what he has done, what he is doing in and through us, and what he will do.

I got a (very limited) picture of this near/distant vision thing during my trips to various hockey rinks this week. Nicky goes to power skating lessons and hockey practices where he has to do all kinds of drills, practicing stopping, crossovers, backwards skating, transitions, etc. He sometimes finds this quite tedious. He's looking through the top part of the bifocals—he only sees the discomfort and repetition of the moment.

But as his dad, I see the bigger picture. I see his skating improving by leaps and bounds. I see the effect it has when he plays in real games. I know the skills he will develop if he keeps practicing and the fun he will have when he can play hockey without thinking about his skating. Even if he doesn't see it, the big picture is a good one and it's worth working towards!

The same thing is true of your life and my life. We may see nothing but the same old struggles and the same old obligations. We may think that our lives aren't very significant in the grand scheme of things. We may feel like we're spinning our wheels or that the good we do doesn't make much of a difference. But the big picture is that we are all part of a grand story that God is telling, where his creation is being reclaimed and redeemed, and where we are becoming more like him.

And there is no better season than Advent to be reminded of the big picture that all of our lives are working towards.

There is one thing about our passage in Luke 21 that is absolutely clear: God is coming to set things right! The kingdom of God has come, is coming, and will come in fullness.

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## CONCLUSION

I'm going to close with a story. Sometimes it can be difficult to read passages that talk about destruction and death and conflict and strange images such as our passage in Luke this morning. A while back I came across a great story from Darrell Johnson's *Discipleship on the Edge*. The story is told about the book of Revelation, but I think the message applies to passages like ours this morning as well:

*The story is told of a group of seminary students and a janitor. The students were, for a season, playing basketball in a nearby high school gym. While they played, the janitor, who had graciously allowed the seminarians to use the gym after hours, would borrow one of their Bibles and spend the hour reading it. One day, one of the young men asked the janitor, "What have you been reading in the Bible?" "Revelation," he replied. The seminarian chuckled, "Yeah, right." "No, really," said the janitor. Having heard one of his professors say that no one really understands the strange book, the seminarian asked, "Do you understand what you have been reading?" "Oh, yes," replied the now smiling janitor. Chuckling again, the seminarian asked, almost sarcastically, "Well then, tell me what it means." The janitor looked to his right and then to his left, leaned into the seminarian's ear and whispered, "It means that Jesus is gonna win."*

That's the big picture. Jesus is gonna win. As Christians, we have this crazy hope that this little baby is somehow going to win the day! And we get to be a part of it!

Earlier I said that crosses represented death and pain and judgment. But of course we also know that crosses stand for victory. In Colossians 2:14-16 we read this:

*<sup>13</sup>When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, <sup>14</sup>having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup>And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

Advent is the beginning of the great reversal when things begin to turn around. It may not always look like Jesus is winning, or that the sin and darkness that so easily trap and enslave us have been triumphed over by the cross. There are many times in our own lives or in the world around us where this doesn't seem to be the case.

But we need to keep our bifocals on.

The big picture is of a God who comes to identify with his people to enter the human condition, to meet us with grace and compassion but also rule and to judge and who calls his people to live faithfully even when the world around is in chaos and convulsion and crisis.

So this Advent season, may we embrace our glorious God in all the ways he comes to us.

May we find joy and peace and hope and inspiration from the God who comes to us as a baby in a manger to identify with us.

But may we also have ears to hear and eyes to see (in bifocal vision!) so that we recognize the time of God's coming to us and understand that he alone can bring us peace.

May we be challenged and disrupted and unsettled and watchful for the God who comes to us as our judge, as the Lord of history, the Son of Man coming in power and great glory to transform us and to transform the world he loves and for which he died.

Amen.