

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

It seems these days that Black Friday launches us into the Christmas Shopping season and with only 24 shopping days left, we joyfully and at times begrudgingly start running toward Christmas morning...“shopping with our arms full of treasures and hearts all aglow.”<sup>1</sup> However, here in the church, we begin a new liturgical year with a season we know as Advent. You also know that this is a season entitled from a Latin word meaning “coming” or “arrival.” So, as we begin this new liturgical year in the season of anticipation, we begin it with this *lovely* promise we hear in our Gospel lesson, that for some of us according to the Gospel lesson, it will be the end of the world as we know it. As if we are not already loaded down with the weight of the Christmas rush on our shoulders, now we have the blessed weight of preparing, and making ready for that unexpected hour whatever that may mean for us and whenever it may come. Jesus nor Matthew give us any insight into when that will occur...we merely have a promise that it will come, so, be ready...or else...and this is how we hear it and interpret this Gospel lesson...not a real upbeat way to begin a new liturgical year. Maybe shopping isn’t so bad after all.

I thought about this passage that we hear not just this year, but similar passages every year at the start of Advent. When looking at all three of the appointed Gospel lessons for the first Sunday of Advent, no matter the lectionary year, A, B, or C, they all are assigned a text from Jesus' "temple discourse." This discourse is when Jesus tells of the destruction of the temple...not one stone is left upon another. We just heard this from Luke’s Gospel on the last Green Sunday of this year which is Year C in the three-year cycle of readings. Now we begin this new liturgical Year A with a similar passage about the temple destruction. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all discuss both the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and signs of the end times.

In his Temple Discourse, we hear the voice of Jesus warning us about false prophets, "wars and rumors of wars," and other calamities, and concludes with a call for believers to be watchful and spiritually alert for his eventual second coming. And of course, our reaction is the same as it has been since Jesus said it...what can we do to either stop it, avoid it, or be saved from it. But when we consider these assigned passages for the start of a new liturgical year, it seems that our natural instinct of fight or flight quickly kicks in and we want to either fight it or run from it so that we are not swept away in it.

Perhaps as we consider this passage before us we find ourselves lamenting this threat of destruction as Jeremiah laments for the people of Judah:

<sup>18</sup> My joy is gone, grief is upon me,  
my heart is sick.

<sup>19</sup> Hark, the cry of my poor people  
from far and wide in the land:

‘Is the Lord not in Zion?

Is her King not in her?’

(‘Why have they provoked me to anger with their images,  
with their foreign idols?’)

<sup>20</sup> ‘The harvest is past, the summer is ended,  
and we are not saved.’

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<sup>1</sup> This line is from “*Silent Night All Day Long*” John Prine, Track 3 on A John Prine Christmas, Oh Boy Records, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,  
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.  
<sup>22</sup> Is there no balm in Gilead?  
Is there no physician there?  
Why then has the health of my poor people  
not been restored? (Jeremiah 8:18-22)

I think, out of fear, we ease the tension of these eschatological readings that begin Advent by concluding that this season of anticipation is simply about the birth of Jesus. However, the point of exploring these destructive passages that kick off our Advent Season is to see more than the birth of Jesus, it is for us to consider the future *return* of Jesus and to notice that the voice of Jesus in the Gospels is telling us to expect more from him, to expect completion, and not just the destruction we assume about these passages.<sup>2</sup> This Gospel calls to us to consider not just the beauty of the manger and the birth that we anticipate again, but to consider also that this is the same baby Jesus declaring, "It is finished" from the cross, signifying that his mission to fulfill Old Testament prophecies, atone for humanity's sins, and establish a path of reconciliation with God is complete...making *our* reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ...finished. This statement "It is finished" was not a statement of defeat but a cry of triumph, meaning the debt of sin was "paid in full" and his sacrifice was final and complete for you, for me, and for all.

What then does the eschatological nature of the start of this season mean for us as we anticipate once again the coming of our Lord in this new Advent Season. Maybe we react in the spirit of our current culture or our contemporary thinking and understanding...tear it all down and start over. But even this destruction of cultures and people over the centuries is nothing new. We have witnessed this throughout history. Of course, it is all built up again and we redundantly assume that we are aiming to build something new and improved but we end up building exactly what was tore down to start with.

So, today in this Gospel, the voice of Jesus is moving us to consider what are we going to build up or reestablish out there as well as in our hearts when our world and all our assumptions get torn down in the anticipation of our Lord's coming? Maybe we can take a page from Isaiah's playbook and build for ourselves a lofty place far above the muck and the mire of our current culture where we can beat our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. But in order to get to this point we need to recognize two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left, two may be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. In other words, those who don't think like us, live like us, vote like us, or look like us will be left...but what about loving our neighbor as ourselves, does this not apply?

This is all to say that this place we build will not lofty at all because it will be to our specs, and will function and turn according to our sensibilities, and according to our judgments and it will not be the Lord's house because we will have built it. Sadly, when we reflect on this passage, we merely protect ourselves, our understandings, and our emotions from what we assume this eschatological season means. Perhaps instead of avoiding this eschatological notion we ought to lean into it and NOT see it as an end but as see it as a new beginning in ourselves, from what was.

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<sup>2</sup> Skinner, Matthew L., *Voices of Advent, The Bible's Insights for a Season of Hope*. Nashville: Abington Press, 2025, page 3.

This anxious expectation this Gospel evokes is only a protective fear within us, a fear of the end of the world as we know it and like it rather than a new beginning with Christ.

This is an *issue* for the world, but for us as Christians, we ought to know that it is who we are as children of God, it is a function or a characteristic of who we are...it is listening to the voice of Jesus and expecting more and hoping for more because we know of the promise that comes from this birth we anticipate...the hope and promise we know that comes from the cross and comes from within the darkness of all that this birth and this cross has destroyed. We know the hope and the promise of expectation, the promise of His coming again and His arrival is what guides our faith not to ourselves and our world, but to the one who is the light in the darkness of any type of destruction.

And like the destructive passages that begins our Advent season every year we also hear these words and sing them with our hearts full of anticipation and hope:

Wake, awake, for night is flying,  
the watchmen on the heights are crying;  
awake, Jerusalem, at last.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the voice of Jesus is calling us to look into our own hearts, to awake, to see, and to anticipate a new beginning in ourselves...to recognize a faith that allows us to see our Lord is not on a high mountain, nor in our attempts to elevate ourselves upon that high mountain away from the world, but to see the Lord in the mess that is around us and to be that presence of hope and peace rather than hate and destruction. To recognize that what we hold so dearly to in this world is merely separating us more and more. And in that divisiveness, perhaps we can recognize that we are guided by our own moral compass that is calibrated with “my” value system, “my” likes and dislikes, and “my” facts that are based on my opinion. Perhaps if we can tear down these temples within ourselves and maybe we can begin to recognize the goodness that we have been blessed with in the others that are around us.

In the darkness of that destruction, may we see once again, the church’s season of Advent begins in darkness...whatever form of darkness that may be, it is in that darkness that we light one candle. That one candle is a small but significant sign that reminds us once again of the expectant hope for all the world that is coming in the birth of Jesus Christ as well as the hope and promise of a second coming. Just as any light, no matter the size or power of the light, it shatters the darkness. In this candle we light today in our Advent wreath it is representative of the light of hope that breaks into the darkness of this world. This one candle of hope is recalling the prophecies about the Messiah's coming. The world’s darkness is broken and is made new in this light. Oh what hope, what grace, and what joy we are all given in that light...a light that is Jesus Christ the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome!

May this one candle that we light today, shed light on the darkness of our fear and put an end to our self-centeredness and self-righteousness and illumine the hope that is to come in Christ Jesus...

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

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<sup>3</sup> “Wake, Awake, For Night is Flying” hymn number 436, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Augsburg Fortress, Publishers: Minneapolis, 2006.