

# Looking Both Ways

## Luke 21:25-36

### Introduction

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the first of four. The season of Advent ends with Christmas and always contains four Sundays.

Advent is a word that means “coming.”

For the first four centuries after the resurrection of Jesus, the “coming” that was celebrated was the coming of the Wise Men (Magi) to see the baby Jesus. We call that “Epiphany,” and we will celebrate it on the first Sunday of January. In those early centuries Epiphany was the day that new converts to the Christian faith would be baptized and would join the church. So the 40 days of Advent, leading up to Epiphany, were seen as a very somber time – a time of fasting and prayer.

About the fifth century, as the church was trying to rebrand the pagan winter solstice festivals, it switched the focus of Advent from the coming of the Wise Men at Epiphany to the coming of Jesus. But even then the focus was not just the coming of Jesus at Christmas; it also emphasized His coming back at a date in the future. In fact the evidence is pretty good that the second coming was a bigger deal than His first coming.

So, as it relates to Christmas and Epiphany, if are to properly celebrate Advent we need to remember that it is always about looking in two directions: back toward the first coming of Jesus, and forward toward His second coming.

Now, interestingly the first Sunday of Advent is also the first Sunday of the New Church Year. Happy New Year! Typically when we think of a new year, we think of January 1<sup>st</sup>, and New Year’s Eve, football games, and kissing your sweetheart at midnight.

But I find it also fascinating that in our Gregorian calendar, the first month of the new year is named after the Roman god Janus. Janus was the god of beginnings and transitions. As such he presided over passageways, doors, and gates, as well as in transitional periods such as from war to peace or one year to the next. He was usually depicted as having two faces looking at opposite ways, one towards the past and the other towards the future.

So, as we said about Christmas and Epiphany, if are to properly celebrate Advent as it relates to the new year, we need to remember that it is always about looking in two directions: back toward the first coming of Jesus, and forward toward His second coming.

When the prophet Jeremiah spoke the words of our first reading both the birth of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus were in the future. His hearers only thought about the first one.

But when Jesus spoke the words recorded in Luke's gospel He took the same "day of the Lord" imagery and transformed into a call for His followers to look in both directions – back toward His first coming, and forward toward His second coming. I find that captured in two similar phrases in today's gospel reading.

### **1: BE CAREFUL (v. 34)**

Look at verse 34:

*Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. (Luke 21:34)*

Carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life. There is an aimlessness about those words. A sense of life being "stuck." The old gerbil-on-a-wheel perspective on life.

In the time that Jesus would have been speaking, one of the common life philosophies was Stoicism. Stoics believed that human history was circular. It never went anywhere. Every thousand years or so – maybe more, maybe less – history repeated itself. No matter how hard you try, you simply can never get off the off the wheel. Tomorrow is going to be the same as today is. It's never going to change.

When I was a kid growing up in St. Marys, our bank had a revolving door. My brother and I would get in separate cells of that door and go around and around and around. If we went with mom, she would wait patiently until we were done amusing ourselves. If we went with dad, he would let us circle a second time and then trap us until we agreed that the fun was over.

For many people life seems like that kind of endless circle. Except that it is not fun! That circle results in hearts that are weighed down. Such hearts respond with carousing, drunkenness and a life filled with anxieties.

In contrast, the Christian understanding of history is different. We believe that God is constantly at work, moving throughout all time. We believe that history has an ultimate goal – a finality – where Jesus Christ is proclaimed as King of kings and Lord of lords. The Christian perspective is linear, not circular. We are always moving forward toward God's intended purpose.

And if we remember to look both ways, we will see that. Looking one way, we see that after a span of time, Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem. Looking the other way, we see evidence that He will come again. History moving forward.

The writer of Psalm 139 includes this simple prayer:

*Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
(Psalm 139:23)*

While not written with the Advent season in mind, it is a great Advent prayer! *Lord, as I stand here at this moment in history between Your first coming and Your second coming, search me, know me, test me and reveal to me those places where I am living as though caught in a revolving door.*

## **2: BE WATCHFUL (V. 36)**

Verse 36 reads:

*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.  
(Luke 21:36)*

The first hearers would have understood this to mean that by paying attention to what God was doing around them, they would be able to remain faithful and faith-filled to the very end of time.

One of the commentators that I read in preparation for this sermon wrote this:

*Christians must never come to think they are living in a settled situation. They must always be people who live in a permanent state of expectation.*

Christians who look both ways always know God is up to something. They may not know what, but they know He is. That's what the Bible means when it talks about our "hope." Hope is not wishful thinking; it is the expectation that God is going to do something coupled with our desire to see it happen.

That what we mean when we sing:

*My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.*

The way it is ... is not the way it will be. Not as long as God is on the move! And Advent teaches us that God is on the move. Therefore we should expect to see all around us evidence of God at work.

That is why it is so important for people of faith to tell the stories of how they have seen God at work. It keeps us all "watchful" and expectant.

That's another great way to spend this Advent season. Write down every time you see God at work or you hear someone talk about how God is working in their lives. Just see if your expectation level doesn't rise!

## **APPLICATION**

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, we had the chance to spend some quality time with our two-year old granddaughter Allie. As a part of that time we strolled along the downtown area of Connersville, IN, peeking in store windows and looking at Christmas displays.

As we walked I taught her about the orange hand on the opposite street post that meant "stop" and about how it was time to walk with the figure of a person came on in white lights. She picked that up pretty quickly – so much so that when the orange hand began to flash as we were halfway across the street she was insistent that we needed to stop.

I also tried to teach her about looking in both directions before stepping out into the street. That concept must have been a bit more difficult, because I had to remind her over and over again. But when she got it, she would lean way out and look one way and then the next. When she looked both ways, I would say "Are we ready?" and she would answer "Yep."

With that image in your mind, let's approach this Advent season with a commitment to looking both ways before we rush right into the busy traffic of the season.

1. Let's be careful that we don't allow ourselves to buy into a stoic approach life, believing that it is never going to be any different than it is right now. Instead let's turn over those kind of anxious thoughts to Him.
2. Let's be watchful, fully aware of what God is doing in our lives and in the world around us.

Let me conclude by asking you the same question I asked Allie. Hopefully as you listened to this sermon, you began the process of looking back toward the birth of Jesus and forward to His second coming. So in a moment, I'm going to ask you if you are ready to move into Advent, and I hope you will respond just as she did: "Yep."

So, we come now to this busy intersection of life called Advent. From where we stand we can look one way and see the birth of Christ and by the looking the other way we see that He is coming again. With all of our anxieties and cares placed into His hands, and ever aware that He is actively at work all around us, I ask you now ... "Are you ready?" ("Yep!")

Amen.