

Today’s Scripture reading from Luke 21 contains a message from the Lord whose second coming will usher in the end. *“There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity... People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken”* (vss. 25-26).

In 1994 Elizabeth Achtemeier wrote in *Interpretation* magazine, “Despite the fact that Christians confess the second coming in the Apostles’ Creed (*‘from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead’*), that confession embodies a worldview that is almost totally foreign to most people. It states that God will bring this world to an end, and that is hard to believe. We have no difficulty in believing that human beings can bring the world to an end by detonating their nuclear arsenals. But it is difficult to imagine that God would do such a deed, especially when [the Bible] says that it will be preceded by such terrible signs: the sun, moon and stars will be darkened (v. 25), people fainting from terror (v. 26), and even the heavenly bodies shaken (v. 26). We expect God to preserve our world, not to destroy it, and to think that he will bring it all to an end upsets our feelings of security” (pp. 401-402).

This powerful text tells us what the Lord’s Prayer means when it instructs us to pray, *“thy kingdom come.”* Don’t we usually thoughtlessly repeat that petition in the prayer? Without Jesus’ teaching about the “signs” of his coming kingdom here in Luke 21, the Lord’s Prayer could become just a meaningless collection of pious phrases. Fred Craddock writes in his commentary on Luke’s gospel: “Having moved the listeners from the realms of cosmic signs to their experienced world of nature, Jesus now moves them finally to themselves. The life of disciples, after all is said and done, is not one of speculation or of observation but of behavior and relationships” (*Luke*, p. 248). Bernard of Clairvaux had a saying about the season of Advent that fits this Scripture well: “There are three distinct comings of the Lord of which I know: his coming **to** [us], his coming **into** [us], and his coming **against** [us].”

Jesus is describing incidents, events, and scenarios that are unfamiliar in degree if not totally. Humans will be living in a strange and dangerous environment. As different as this depiction seems to us, the one thing Christians can grasp of Jesus’ message in any age is his command to PRAY when he urges us to *“Be always on the watch”* in verse 36. I think what Jesus means by prayer is not simply an individual believer holding communion with God in their heart. It’s more a posture of life and an activity shared with other believers. One might say that prayer is the result of our faith. But it’s really where faith leads us—into God’s presence. Richard Foster expresses this sense of prayer as the summary of the Christian life when he ends his book titled, *Prayer*, with this benediction: “May you now, by the power of the Holy Spirit, receive the spirit of prayer. May it become, in the name of Jesus Christ, the most precious occupation of your life. And may the God of all peace strengthen you, bless you, and give you joy—Amen” (p. 256).

In many places the Bible speaks of God’s salvation, the fulfillment of his promises made with Israel and with the church. The tribulations that will come are “signs” of God’s salvation, but they are also portents of the end. Biblical passages like this one are not meant to depress people but rather encourage believers in their faith. God’s Word is eternal; God’s promises are sure. We do not need to be afraid of anything.

People often fear what is unknown and unexpected so we are given these words that we might not be taken by surprise. Jesus tells us, *“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”* (v. 28). For sure, the Day of Judgment is coming. The wicked will be punished and the redeemed will be saved. Yet the theme of this Scripture is that we should be ready for a sudden end to the world as we know it. None of us will live in this body forever and we may not have much warning. As Jesus reminds us, *“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. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. **Be always on the watch**”* (vss. 34-36).

How do we go about “watching” for Jesus’ return? Let’s first talk about what Jesus does not want us to do: Make his return the object of obsessive speculation; or completely ignore it. Jesus teaches us to be ready and prepared. We’re not to spend our days “staring into heaven” like his disciples did after the Ascension. **Instead, we are to live our days in hope and anticipation.** Alcoholics Anonymous has a twelve step program that begins with an affirmation that we are powerless and a belief that a higher power can restore us. There’s a time is to admit to God and to another person the exact nature of our wrongs with a willingness to let God remove those shortcomings; confess our sins to God and receive the forgiveness which God promises. Everyone is encouraged to do just that. But the twelve steps do not stop with confession to God, and neither should our Christian faith. Jesus tells us, *“For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins”* (Matthew 6:14-15). He taught us to pray, *“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us”* (Luke 11:4).

When you think about it, this is pretty scary stuff. Ask forgiveness of those we have wronged and forgive those who have wronged us, the same way that Jesus did. Tim Keller has written, “In all cases when wrong is done there is a debt, and there is no way to deal with it without suffering: either you make the perpetrator suffer for it or you forgive and suffer for it yourself.”

Millions have been freed from addiction by twelve step programs. Leonard Felder explains in *A Fresh Start* : “If you have someone from your past with whom you have never been able to resolve your differences...now is a good time to start. There is nothing more cleansing,” he writes, “than working through your feelings towards someone whose impact on your life is still being felt. You don’t need to carry your conflicts with this person forever.”

The relatives of people killed inside the historic African American church in Charleston, S.C. in 2015 spoke directly to the 21 year old gunman, Dylann Roof, at his first court appearance, as reported by *The Washington Post*. One by one, those who chose to speak at a bond hearing did not turn to anger. Instead, while he remained impassive, they offered him forgiveness and said they were praying for his soul, even as they described the pain of their losses. “I forgive you,” Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, said at the hearing, her voice breaking with emotion. “You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you...”

A man once said to me in a Bible study, “When I can’t forgive someone, I turn it over to the Lord and ask him to take care of it.” I didn’t say this to him in the middle of the Bible study, but I thought, “There are

some things we should not expect God to take care of. Better that we ask for the grace to forgive and the strength to move on in our own lives without the poison of bitterness or a grudge.” The authors of the book *To Forgive is Human* suggest, “Hate and not forgiving are like an addiction. They make us feel better immediately, but in the long run they destroy. They have as much control over us as prison bars.”

Huston Smith, a scholar of world religions, studied the distinctive characteristics of a number of faiths. When he got to Christianity, Smith simply said, “Forgiveness. This is what makes Christianity distinctive. Forgiveness is the very strange notion that makes the teaching of Jesus different.” We are forgiven through the death of Christ. We receive that redemption through faith and then we live out our calling by forgiving and being forgiven. A woman whose husband had died told me he had organized everything and planned his own funeral—except he hadn’t cleaned out his drawers. I don’t know if I will ever get around to cleaning out my drawers. But I know that we get our houses in order by making amends with those we have wronged and forgiving those who have wronged us.

Be always on the watch—to forgive and to be forgiven.

Then we will be ready for the end, whenever it comes. Amen.