

God's Invitation to Prepare: Trapped by the Trappings Dr. Charles B. Hardwick
Joel 2:1-2, 10-13, Luke 21:5-7, 25-28, 34-36 First Presbyterian Church
December 2, 2018 Lake Forest, IL 60045

Joel 2:1-2, 10-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.
The earth quakes before them,
 the heavens tremble.
The sun and the moon are darkened,
 and the stars withdraw their shining.
The LORD utters his voice
 at the head of his army;
how vast is his host!
 Numberless are those who obey his command.
Truly the day of the LORD is great;
 terrible indeed—who can endure it?
Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing.

I just want to do a little expectation management before I read the scripture this morning. I suspect many of you came to worship this morning looking forward to a passage about the little baby Jesus lying in the manger. If you glanced ahead at the scripture readings, you'll know this text is not exactly that. It comes in the gospel of Luke during Holy Week—after Palm Sunday and just before Maundy Thursday.

So maybe you're like someone in the Wednesday morning Bible study who said "So why are we reading this in Advent?"

Excellent question. We usually think of Advent as a time of waiting for Jesus to come—and we do. But it's really a little broader than this. Advent is better framed as a time when we wait for God to break into the world and make everything right. When Jesus came 2000 years ago, it was an amazing way that God has broken into the world. More amazingly than ever before!

But it isn't the only way that God has ever broken into the world, and it's not the only way that God will break into the world. When Jesus comes back at the end of history, God will break into the world even more powerfully and amazingly! That's why traditionally on the first Sunday of Advent—today—we focus on Jesus' second coming. And that's where Luke takes us in our passage this morning.

Luke 21:5-7, 25-28, 34-36 (The Message)

One day people were standing around talking about the Temple, remarking how beautiful it was, the splendor of its stonework and memorial gifts. Jesus said, "All this you're admiring so much—the time is coming when every stone in that building will end up in a heap of rubble."

They asked him, “Teacher, when is this going to happen? What clue will we get that it’s about to take place?”

“It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

“And then—then!—they’ll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!”

“But be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it’s going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don’t go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.”

So...there are how many shopping days until Christmas? 22.

Anyone finished yet?

There is so much to do to get ready for Christmas. Some people are like my mom—who attacked Christmas with a passion, figuring out the best menu, hitting all the parties, and planning out all the shopping, so that all four of us kids received not only the same number of presents, but that those same number of presents cost within \$1.99 of the total spending for each kid. Some of you parents know exactly what I’m talking about.

Then there was my high school friend Pat. One year he literally did all of his Christmas shopping on Christmas eve. Not Christmas Eve day, but Christmas eve evening...by following the blue light around K-Mart and buying whatever

went on sale. Some of you may also know exactly what I'm talking about with last-minute preparation, too.

Getting prepared for Christmas, one way or another, is critical. That's why our theme for Advent is "God's invitation to prepare." And today that means preparing for Jesus' second coming. According to Jesus, it's going to be a cosmic, cataclysmic event.

"It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic."

And we have to be ready for it.

But be on your guard...otherwise, that day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap...So whatever you do, don't go to sleep at the switch!

It's a trap! One reason Jesus says it's a trap is because many of us get complacent thinking that we're already ready, even if we're not. It's a trap that comes when we get a false sense of what we are certain we deserve.

A coworker of mine from back before seminary fell into this kind of trap. Alfonso and I worked at Bain and Company, a management consulting firm, in their office in Madrid. The partners and the managers had offices; the rest of us were in a big open space together. You know, the kind of big open space that studies now show totally hinders performance!

Anyway, there were two managers and one of them left the firm. Alfonso decided to move himself into that managers' office. He was 100% sure he deserved the promotion more than anyone else.

100% sure, until the Christmas party when the partners announced that someone else was getting promoted. On his way out of the office and back to the dreaded open space, Alfonso was off-balance, wondering how he could have misunderstood where he belonged so badly.

Misunderstanding where we are with our faith is an even bigger problem than misunderstanding our professional status. I know I usually feel so certain of my faith. I think I have nothing to worry about when Jesus comes back. I'm in like Flynn! It's going to be great!

But then this passage knocks me off-balance. I might be one of the people trapped because I'm asleep at the switch. There are a lot of passages in the Bible giving us confidence about God's love for us and our salvation. But here Jesus wants us to make sure that the confidence doesn't become overconfidence. Otherwise we'll be trapped.

We can be trapped by our overconfidence in our faithfulness. And if that's not bad enough, we can also get trapped by the trappings of Christmas. Here's how Jesus puts it:

Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping.

All the menus and gifts and cards and events and travels—Jesus says they can trap us by making us forget how we need to be preparing for his second coming.

Now—remember—Jesus does not say to stop our parties and drinking and shopping. He is not telling us to excuse ourselves from all the things that make Christmas so memorable. But he IS telling us to be careful—all the trappings

can trap us—lull us into thinking that Christ’s coming is the least important part of Christmas.

In this year’s Advent devotion, Martha Zeeman wrote about not getting trapped by the trappings. I want you to know I had written my whole sermon before realizing I could work this in. I did not steal the whole sermon from Martha! I only stole this part:

[This month] we will prepare for the birth of our Savior. Many of us will be shopping for the perfect gift and decorating our homes for gatherings. It is easy to get “caught up in the season” with activities and forget what this season is really about. While Christmas is still [a few weeks] away, let us remember that Jesus can reign in our lives, in our minds and in our hearts right now. We don’t have to wait for Christmas...Already we can shout from our own mountain tops by living the example of Jesus every day of this season and beyond. We can openly share our faith and our joy by simply living every day with kindness, integrity, mercy and grace.

There were three families at the church I served in Atlanta who figured out how to shout Jesus’ example from the mountaintops, as Martha put it, even while taking part in parties and drinking and shopping.

The first thing they all did on Christmas morning was come to the church, where they made dozens of sausage biscuits and filled paper cups with hot chocolate. Then they wrapped themselves up—they had this funny notion that it was cold in Atlanta at Christmas—and made the rounds downtown, bringing breakfast to everyone they could find on the streets without a home that day.

On Christmas morning, they didn't let the sharp edge of their expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. They let their parties and drinking and shopping be shaped by their sharp expectation. They shopped--for biscuits and sausages and breakfast treats. They drank--hot chocolate and shared it with everyone around them. And they had a party--even though it was early, I'm certain that assembling the breakfast and delivering it to the homeless felt like a party...a Christmas party...an amazing Christmas party.

The kind of amazing Christmas party that you throw when you know that Jesus is one day coming again, and you're making sure you're ready.