

**Gospel & Sermon December 1, 2024**  
**First Sunday of Advent**  
**Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone**  
**“Stand up. Raise your heads. Live in hope.”**



*God will fulfill God's purposes and, already, hidden signs of that fulfillment abound. On that great day there will be dismay, perplexity, confusion, and terror, but God's people shall be given strength to stand boldly and receive God's promised redemption.*

**Gospel: Luke 21:25-36**

[Jesus said:] “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to

take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

### **Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone**

**“Stand up. Raise your heads. Live in hope.”**

Legend has it that Martin Luther once said: “Even if I knew the world were going to end tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today.” Even in times of peace and calm, planting an apple tree is a sign of hope.

Dwarf apple trees don’t start bearing fruit for two to three years after planting. A standard size apple tree might take eight years to start producing.\* So whether Luther said it or not, planting an apple tree is still a sign of hope - a sign of our trust in God’s promised future. And it points us to a way of living as followers of Jesus in uncertain times.

These scripture lessons about uncertainty, disaster, and calamity can be hard to listen to when we’d rather be preparing and hoping for joy and peace and a silent night. Jesus’ words disrupt our visions of a sweet, quiet baby who doesn’t even stir when the little drummer boy plays pa-rum-pa-pum-pum.

But this is how we start Advent each year: with a reminder that even as we are waiting to sing with the angels who herald Jesus' birth, we are also anticipating the great shake-up that heralds Jesus' return.

When God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven, the kingdoms, nations, and rulers of this world will not concede without a fight. Injustice and oppression will cease, but not with the quick and easy surrender of those who benefit from injustice and oppression. A holy shake-up will be necessary. And we'll feel the shaking, too.

We might not like change, but Jesus promises, there will be change. For justice and righteousness to prevail, to permeate the whole world, things must change.

The entire cosmos will quake. There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. Seas will roar. People will faint with fear.

When Jesus' followers begin to see these signs, we have some options: We might numb our fears with dissipation and drunkenness. We might say, "Well, we're doomed anyway. Might as well live for ourselves and have fun while we can." We might run and hide. We might put a note in the calendar to skip the first Sunday of Advent next year.

But Jesus calls us to stand up confidently, raise our heads, because our redemption is near. Jesus calls us to keep on following faithfully, especially when our human tendency might be to cower in fear or try to isolate ourselves from the chaos.

In short, Jesus calls us to live in hope, because the change that is coming is exactly the change we have been waiting for; it's the renewal creation has been groaning for and the redemption we all need.

Hope is not simply a life raft we cling to, some anesthetizing delusion, or the dream of escaping to heaven. When it feels like the world around us is collapsing, hope is the thing that keeps us standing tall, trusting in God's promises. In the words of one theologian, hope is "the divine power that makes us alive in this world."

In uncertain times, even in the midst of disaster, what does being alive with hope look like? What work is ours to do?

Maybe it helps to remember the work Jesus came to do. Jesus announced his mission way back at the beginning of his earthly ministry, in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. Remember how he unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And remember when Jesus rolled that scroll back up and announced: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21).

Jesus invited disciples then and he still invites disciples now to join him on that mission.

There are still people living in poverty who need good news. There are still people held captive in prisons; there are still people captive to sin and slavery and despair. There are still people who need healing in body, mind, and spirit. There are still people oppressed by forces like racism, ageism, sexism, and greed.

Those are all opportunities to plant apple trees.

Even just one. Even if it feels like the world might end tomorrow.

No, one apple tree won't save the world. In reality, one apple tree probably won't even bear fruit. For most varieties, you need two, for some cross-pollination. But you don't necessarily have to plant two yourself. Not if your neighbors are also planting.

So, no, one apple tree won't save the world. It doesn't have to. One act of healing or mercy or liberation won't save the world. It doesn't have to.

But plant a tree anyway. Show mercy anyway. Welcome the stranger anyway. Give to charity anyway. Volunteer your time anyway. Love and serve your neighbors anyway. Let love increase and abound - love for one another and love for all.

Because we do not plant alone. When we plant together, our work will bear more fruit, and Jesus has the power to multiply that fruit like loaves and fish for the sake of the world.

We do not plant alone. And we do not plant in order to save the world. Jesus is the one who saves the world.

We plant trees - and we continue the work of healing and liberation and justice - as a sign of living hope in God's promised future - even and especially when it feels like the world is falling apart around us. Because Jesus has told us that the shaking of earth, sea, and sky are not signs of our doom but signs of our redemption unfolding.

So we don't have to be afraid when Jesus talks like this. We can stand up and raise our heads. We can keep living in hope, serving in hope, loving our neighbors in hope.

So hear today's gospel and stand up in confident hope. We have trees to plant.

Pastor Jaime

\*<https://extension.umn.edu/fruit/growing-apples>

\*Jurgen Moltmann in *Love: The Foundation of Hope*, Harper & Row, 1988.

*Presented December 1, 2024 at Bethel Lutheran Church in Muskego, WI 53150*

*©2024 Jaime Larson-McLoone*