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Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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First Sunday in Advent B – November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

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

C: AMEN!

Imagine traveling in a foreign city where English is not the official language. All the street signs, menus, billboards, bus schedules, everything you need to navigate the streets are in a different language. You stop people on the street for assistance, but it seems no one speaks English.

For first-time travelers, this could be a scary and intimidating situation, but more seasoned and experienced travelers seem to relish such a challenge. Fortunately, today our electronic devices can translate foreign text into English. All a person has to do is point the device at the written text you want translated, and – *voilà!* – it gives the English translation.

Sometimes Christians may feel as if our spiritual journeys have taken us to an unknown place where all the signs are in a strange language, and we just can't seem to figure out where we are or where we are supposed to go. As much as we attempt to read the signs in our lives, we find ourselves feeling more and more confused while trying to navigate in a strange land.

For new Christians, reading the signs and navigating their new surroundings can become tricky and very confusing. This is especially true with all the conflicting religious messages coming at them from every direction. But whether someone is a new convert or a lifelong Christian, the spiritual journey is full of signs along the way that require translation.

Making things even more troublesome are the modern-day, self-proclaimed prophets who talk about the End Times. They use scripture to weave fanciful tales of horrific proportions, which, if we were to accept them as truth without testing them against God's Spirit, can lose people in their journeys.

Similarly, Jesus' disciples were confused by the signs of their times. Israel was under Roman rule, contemporary prophets were routinely spouting predictions about the end of the world, and the Jews were desperate for a Messiah who would reinstate the royal line of the House of David and establish Israel to its former

glory as an independent kingdom. In the midst of all the confusing signs and false prophets, Jesus warned his disciples – as we are warned today – to stay awake; to watch.

This implies that we should be alert and aware of what is happening in our surroundings, living in a constant state of readiness and anticipation. But it doesn't, suggest that believers should be pouring over scripture in a vain attempt to find a prophetic interpretation for every single event in history or in the news. Much time and energy has been wasted on End Time books, movies and prophecies. Now is the time to focus on proclaiming the Good News in Christ by being his hands reaching out to those in need.

As the church enters into this Advent season, the world is in a race to read the signs of the times in an attempt to make sense of everything that is going on. We just come through a very contentious general election and, although a new President-elect has been declared, the establishment of a new administration next year still seems to be troublesome. We are in the midst of the most pernicious pandemic in 100 years, with arguments about how to fight it being fought daily, especially in social media. We have experienced a new level of multi-racial opposition to violence against Black and Brown people in this country, but that battle is still in our lives as White nationalists organize and appear in force from time to time. There still are reports of terrorism, a heightened level of violence against immigrants to our country, sexual harassment and abuse, nations risking war against other nations, increasing religious extremism and intolerance. Political and religious leaders are under continual scrutiny as reports of indiscretion and malfeasance surface. People feel like they are being pitted against each other in a continual competition for limited resources while people of wealth only increase their prosperity and people who are vulnerable in society suffer the most.

When we look at the present situation as a whole, we can easily begin to wonder what all this means. It's no wonder that some people begin to interpret all these events as signs of the End Times. People begin to lose hope and a sinister spiritual and mental apathy sets in.

In the midst of suffering and despair, the world longs for some cosmic event that will wipe away all that is wrong in a single stroke. In the midst of doomsday predictions there are some who warn that Christ's return is just around the corner. Despite their confidence, Jesus clearly told us that no one knows the time of his appearance, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (Mark 13:32).

Predictions about the end of time in social media and from pulpits indicate the fear and anxiety filling people's hearts because of life's uncertainties. But the church's emphasis on scripture, tradition and reason is the lens through which we can put these signs into focus and understand them better. Part of remaining alert in these times is a commitment to continual study of scripture in light of historic teachings of the church, developing critical-thinking skills, and seeking a discerning spirit.

The church is firm in the belief in the return of Christ Jesus, but exactly how and when this cosmic event will take place remains a mystery. Scripture doesn't give a clear explanation; however, it does provide signs to help navigate life's journey with the help of the Holy Spirit until the Lord's Second Coming. Until Christ's return, the church is reminded to remain awake as we diligently carry on God's ministry. We learn from the past while maintaining a confident faith in the future, all the time tending to the work of the Kingdom of God today. The parable about not being caught sleeping while the master is away, focuses our waiting so that we're on "active alert," rather than just sitting back in patient anticipation.

In light of all that troubles the world today, this Advent presents a unique opportunity for the church to stand in the gap and proclaim the Good News of Christ Jesus through word and action. We **have** come through the general election with a President-elect who is committed to working for healing of discord in our society and taking steps to achieve equity in our public policies and practices. Scientists **have** developed new vaccines that initially seem beneficial to protect us against COVID-19. Many people have organized locally to address the needs of people who have been impacted by businesses closing, and jobs being lost.

Yes, our traditional congregational life has been impacted by the limits on gathering in person that the pandemic has required. But we still can act in smaller ways, supporting even more enthusiastically efforts to care for people who are in need like those of Lutheran Social Services. We can use the technology that God has made known through creative minds in our world the means to continue our "gathering" for worship, study, prayer and fellowship virtually. One of my big "thank yous" this year on Thanksgiving was for what "Zoom" has enabled us to do as church. We can continue to be in touch with one another through the various means of technology available to us, even the "old school" form of making phone calls to our sisters and brothers in Christ and other neighbors.

These are the ways that we can watch and wait in our current situation. Being involved in these ways is doing God's work in the world. Now is the time for us to

be diligent in proclaiming the Kingdom of God in our lives and our conversations. If we believers are to interpret any message from the signs of the times, it is that God's grace is sufficient to sustain God's people, even in the worst of circumstances.

I have felt called to being on active alert by taking a role in our Synod's Anti-Racism Committee. I understand that many White people are driven by fear and anxiety to protect their position when they feel threatened financially, but I'm hopeful that believers can find the courage to be confident that God will strengthen us to the end – to teach us new ways of living so that we can find ways to give up that privilege and live more equally – just with the millions of people in our country who have been denied equity in income, opportunity and freedom. It's slow going and sometimes terribly frustrating to try to understand how many White people can't admit our privilege and refuse to give it up in an effort to move closer to equity among the members of God's creation. And – of course – I'm not immune to being blind to my own biases and prejudices. Without realizing it at times, I fall into the familiarity of old patterns and have to be shaken awake. That's why waiting and watching and working to make changes are necessary.

History teaches us that the church on earth is victorious even under the most extreme conditions. The early church faced systematic persecution under Roman domination, but their hope in Christ's Second Coming gave them the courage to boldly proclaim their faith in Christ, even if it resulted in their martyrdom. Eventually, the church settled into the knowledge that the Second Coming is an event that will take place sometime in the distant future. And while we're on active alert for its arrival, we must continue systematically to spread the Good News that is found in Jesus Christ.

Whether Christ returns today, tomorrow or in a hundred – or a thousand – years, **today** is the day of salvation. God has **already** accepted each one of us as his own – just as we are. If we look closely at the signs of the times, we see that they point to the One who holds all the answers to all that ails the world. Christ's mission remains as clear today as it was when he first sent his disciples into the world.

May we be faithful to proclaiming God's love for all creation and to continue our service in the name of Christ, using what God has given us in new ways. In the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **C: AMEN**