



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
December 1, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "The Weary World Rejoices"

Luke 21:25-36 (NRSV)

"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 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."

The Weary World Rejoices¹

Months ago, our Westminster staff gathered to plan the Advent season. As we started, each staff member spoke about their impressions of Advent from years past and what they message they hoped to convey this year.

Over and over again, the staff said there's one note we must strike harder this year, because we need it now, perhaps more than ever before. That note is Joy.

Let's not make Advent a dirge, we said.
Enough of the brooding, weary, ponderous waiting of Advents past.

Let's not forget, to make sure, a bit more joy gets in too.

That's what we really need, isn't it? As Winter descends. As a long, difficult, divisive, fearful year gives way. Don't you need it? This ephemeral, scarce thing we call 'joy'?

Let's face it, outside the church walls, its 'joy, joy joy' all the time – in your face, 'joy!' It's not even Advent, its Christmas out there! Already, it's Santas waving from every lawn; brilliant lights in every parking lot; sales welcoming every shopper. Lindsey and I went to the mall Friday night. We almost didn't make it out.

And if its Christmas out there, then Advent in here, has got to bring with it, just bit of joy, too, right? Don't we all need more joy, inside these walls too?

¹ Like the illustration that closes the sermon, the title also comes from Duke Historian Kate Bowler. This is the title of her Advent planning resource: "The Weary World Rejoices" by Brenda Thompson and Karen Bowler, www.katebowler.com.

After hearing this, I guess you could call it, our longing for joy as a staff, we sat down in that planning meeting to read the Advent Sunday texts that would guide our worship this season.

Perhaps Scripture could bring us some of that Christmas cheer! What do we have here? Well, you know. You just heard it.

Advent 1: There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations...People will faint from fear and foreboding on what is coming upon the world.

I appreciate how the Message Bible paraphrases this verse. It gets right to the point: *All hell has broken loose*. What a way to begin the season!

But the first Sunday of Advent always starts on an apocalyptic note. We can't make things too easy for the preacher on the first Sunday, after all.

So we moved on.

The next two Sundays, Advent 2 and 3 draw from the 3rd Chapter of Luke. There we read:

John [the Baptist] said to the crowds... 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?...Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree...that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

So much Christmas joy! Perhaps a dirge really is more in order.

No. Not really.

The truth is, despite these first impressions, there is Joy in Advent, even in these texts. But it's a complex joy. Scripture does not allow us a pure,

unadulterated, mindless joy – joy divorced from the realities, the pains of this life. Scripture is more true to life than that.

In fact, in Scripture, joy and weariness are not in opposition. Instead, in contrast to the messages trying to sell us joy in the stores, Scripture reminds us that, yes, longing *and* joy coincide; they always coincide; joy can and must be found within the longing, because God never ignores our longing.

Take Luke 21 for example.

There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations...All hell has broken loose. [By the way, I double checked this: It's not technically a curse word, when used in this way. And after all, it gets the point across.]

In other words, things are going to go south quick, Jesus predicts
-There's our longing; there's our weariness.

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus speaks of the persecution his followers will face:

They will arrest you and persecute you... you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name, vs. 12.

He then predicts the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by the Roman Army, a historical event that happened after 40 years after the crucifixion.

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near, vs. 20.

And then, finally, one day, in an uncertain future, Jesus says,

They will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory, vs. 27. An allusion to his return.

But notice, the coming of the Son of Man doesn't off the fantasy of an escape. Throughout, the text acknowledges that Christ's closet disciples will suffer.

Notice, for example, that there's no rapture; no quick escape for the faithful, taken up in the clouds before the great tribulation. There is tribulation for the faithful in Luke 21. Christ's followers are there, right in the midst of it all.

There is weariness. There is longing in this text. And yet, it's not just longing and weariness.

When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads...you [will] know that the kingdom of God is near.

-There's the joy!

The promise is that the Kingdom will appear, not in spite of trouble, but in the midst of it. Just as God was with us in Christ, so will God be with us, this text says, in the dead of night, in the heaviest of moments, even at the very end.

Your redemption is drawing near.

Weariness and joy, together.

You see, Advent is not escapism, but it's not despair, either. It's a more complex message than that: joy within weariness. Like that famous line, from "O Holy Night," that tells us, that in Advent, "The weary world rejoices."

And yes, that's more complicated than the messages you hear all around us, outside these walls, at this time of year.

Consumerism, for example, promotes a message that it's all joy, or it *can be* all joy. All you need to do is buy this *thing*, or buy this *experience* for yourself, or for your kid, or for your partner, and you will arrive, you will finally have what you long for.

And some churches, let's face it most churches, even you and me every once in a while, buy into a similar idea when it comes to our faith. If we could just believe, or if we could just believe in the right way, or if we just had better faith, then we'd be saved! We'd be fine. Everything would fine, finally.

And it's not just in the store or the sanctuary, where such pure joy is promised.

It's, everywhere. Everywhere:

- If the right candidate had won the election.
- If my kid would start making the right grades or finally get accepted to the right school.
- If I could finally get that job, or that promotion I deserve.
- If I could just catch a break, from this schedule, that drains me and my family, more and more every day.
- If my spouse and I, could finally figure out, what we've got to do, to get along with each other.
- Or if the doctor, could finally figure out, what on earth, is going on with me. Or if, or if, or if...

Every once in a while, we all catch ourselves looking up to the sky, waiting for the Son of Man, or whatever the 21st Century equivalent to the 'Son of Man' is, to drop from the sky and make it all okay.

We all long for joy, just joy, unblemished by all this longing. And who can blame us, after a year like we've just had? After a year, like you've just had?

The problem is that the promises of the storefront, and many sanctuaries, and even of our deepest heart's desire rarely deliver. In fact, they never deliver pure, absolute joy – or if they do, its fleeting, and when it's over, we are left instead with this longing. This longing that we don't know what to do with.

And we think because we have it, there must be something wrong with us. Why can't I have the joy that everyone else promises?

The brilliance of this weird, apocalyptic text is that it tells us that longing is a part of life, that longing is even a part of faith. And that longing does not exclude joy.

Because God remembers the weary. And God hears our longing. And when the troubles of this life surround us, God draws near.

Be on guard, it says, so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.

When you see these things taking place...know that the kingdom of God is near.

[That] your redemption is drawing near

The message of Scripture, over and over again, is that the closer the trouble, the closer God is. Our joy draws near precisely as the weariness starts to take root. That is, in fact, the Advent story. That is, in fact, what we proclaim when we say, 'Emmanuel: God with us.'

Last week, while I was on study leave, I heard an interview with the Rev. Dr. Sam Wells, currently the Vicar of St.-Martin-in-the-Fields, a famous old Anglican parish in London.² Before that, Rev. Wells served

² The following story comes from: *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler*, "Sam Wells: Being With." Season 13. Episode 12. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/being-with/>

as Dean of Duke University Chapel – but try not to hold that against him.

He's also the author of some 50 books; he's a regular on BBC.

In the interview, Wells talked about his friend David. He's known David since they were both teenagers. They attended Oxford together. They have been close friends for decades.

In the early 2000s, David began to suffer a post-viral condition that left him incapacitated for long stretches at a time. David has prolonged periods, even today, where he cannot leave the house. Sometimes, he can't even leave his room. His speech is deeply affected, so much so that there's moments when he struggles to speak single words.

One day, when Sam Wells was visiting his friend, one of those words David spoke with great exertion was 'Eucharist.'

And so, on a whim, by David's request, Rev. Wells celebrated the Lord's Supper with his chronically ill friend.

Wells went looking in the cupboard, and found some vermouth and a cheese cracker. At this point in the story, the interviewer, upon hearing these chosen elements, exclaimed, 'gross.' Sometimes you have to make do.

And Wells and David went through the Anglican liturgy of the Eucharist. The most touching point, Wells said, was when the liturgy came to the point of confessing sins. Because, what sin has David committed, locked away in his home? But Wells and David went through this part of the liturgy anyway, because, to tell David he was incapable of sin, seemed to rob him of his agency.

They went through the reading of Scripture. What Scripture would be

appropriate, for such a moment, they asked? Jesus with the paralytic. Jesus calming the storm.

They got to the moment of prayer. What do you pray for, in a moment like that? Do you pray for a miracle? Do you pray for strength to get through the day? What?

Wells didn't say what they prayed for. What he did say, was, sharing that prayer, was an intimacy with his dear friend, unlike he had ever experienced before.

And then they had their cracker. And their vermouth, in little plastic cups.

At the end of the story, Wells said, out of his whole long and storied pastoral career, "I can't think of a more rewarding priestly moment in the last 32 years."

I think this is what it means, when we say, that the Kingdom of God comes near, at the point where joy meets weariness.

In this life, the weariness doesn't just wash away – David wasn't going to magically get better, in the breaking of the cracker and the swigging of vermouth. And at least in my experience, anything that promises to wash away all my weariness and yours turns out rather disappointing in the end.

But the Gospel truth, our Advent hope, is that the Kingdom of God appears, nonetheless, in and through the vicissitudes of this life.

The Kingdom appears, in the presence of a friend, or a community, that reminds us we all are children of God.

It appears in a piece of bread, and a cup, that sustains us for the journey and reminds us of God's love.

The Kingdom appears, every time we find the strength, to start again. Or to carry on. And to work together, believing that God calls us to make this world a better place.

The Kingdom comes near.
Be alert, because it comes near.

And by the grace of God, Advent us upon us.

What an occasion for joy.