

## “Stand”

*“Prepare The Way” Advent 2018 – part #1*

Luke 21:25-26

Happy New Year! No, I haven't gotten my calendar mixed up. Today is the beginning of the new year for the church, liturgically speaking. You notice the Christmas decorations and the purple cloth on the altar? Those remind us that we are entering into a new season of expectation and hope. For hundreds of years, the church has celebrated Advent four Sundays before Christmas, in the same manner that Lent precedes Easter. If you want to start anew, today is a great day.

Ironically, Advent, the beginning of the new church year, is the time when we start thinking about how things will end. The scriptures in the next four weeks talk about the *Parousia* (pair-oo-SEE-ah), the belief that Jesus will return in glory to this earth. It makes sense, actually, because we still celebrate the story of Jesus' first appearance on this earth. The whole month of December, and a few weeks of November, too, are spent in anticipation of Christmas. That same anticipation turns our focus to Christ's eventual return.

The Bible is clear on this matter. Jesus will come back again, and we must be ready.

Have you ever needed to get ready for something? My testimony today is this: I hate packing for long trips. Without fail, no matter how hard I prepare, I always forget something. True story: two weeks ago, on the way to hunting camp, we got as far as Mancelona before we realized, I had, indeed, forgotten to pack the guns. Slightly important for the trip!

In a similar manner, Luke tells us in chapter 21 that we need to be prepared for Christ’s return, even though we don’t know when that will happen. Why prepare? Luke gives us the answer in verse 28, which is also your memory verse today. “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

“Stand up.” That’s an interesting expression. What does that mean to stand up? It can mean to be counted. To be ready. It can also mean to be brave. To remain steadfast. What is the opposite of standing? Obviously, sitting or lying down. But in the sense that Luke is talking, the opposite of standing would be flinching or hiding.

When you look forward to seeing someone, you stand up, so that you can find them and they can find you. It helps if they’re tall. I recently spoke with a former basketball player, the center, actually. He was over seven feet tall. Even when he was sitting, he was standing! It was quite easy to pick him out over the crowd.

In contrast, if you’re playing hide-and-seek, you don’t stand. You crouch, squat, hide behind large objects, and try to stay out of view. I used to play games with my kids when I came home from work. They would hear the door shut, and come running out to find me, expecting me to be standing in the living room. But to make it fun and unexpected, I would crouch behind a chair until they found me. Then I would stand up and laugh with them.

To be honest, the second coming of Christ is not one of my favorite church doctrines. Why? Simply this: we don’t know the exact day it will happen, so it’s a difficult subject to preach on. The saying goes, “a watched pot never boils.” And

so the emphasis is not on the date Christ will return, but rather, how do we prepare? And why should we prepare?

The “why” is easy to answer. Even though we don’t know when Jesus will return, living a life in preparation for Jesus is better than living for ourselves day-to-day. Again, the example of planning for Christmas is a helpful illustration here. We spend four or five weeks preparing for one major holiday each year. The emphasis we place on it reveals our priorities. In contrast, waiting for Jesus’ return means preparing for eternity with him. That’s vastly more important, and should rightly take more of our attention.

God’s Word gives us all that we need to know about Jesus’ coming back. Jesus himself tells us how to prepare for his return, what to watch for and what to do. So let’s look at a couple of key pieces.

Luke 21:25 tells us that there will be signs in the heavens and on earth. To be honest, this part must have sounded much different to first century Christians. The past few years, we have been blessed to enjoy a solar eclipse and several lunar eclipses. I’ve even seen several comets in my lifetime. But I didn’t go around wearing a sign, shouting, “The end is near!” Why? Our astronomical knowledge has progressed to the point we can predict these things. When Jesus returns, what we will see in the sky will be completely unlike anything we have ever seen before.

We will literally see the “Son of Man coming in a cloud.” That is a reference from the prophet Daniel. Let me read to you the whole passage in Daniel 7.

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all

nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Dan 7:13-14)

“The Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite term for himself, someone who has the glory and authority from God the Father to rule and be worshipped. In my mind, it is not so much the sun, moon, stars, or comets that will cause this great ruckus, it will be the glorious appearance of Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus’ return will be unmistakable, so much, in fact, that the very nations of the earth will tremble. Jesus’ second coming is vastly different from his first. As a child in a manger in the tiny village of Bethlehem, hardly anyone noticed.

However, when Jesus returns to this earth, everyone everywhere will see it. It’s that huge. People will literally faint in terror.

I fainted once. Ironically, it was when a nurse told me to stand up, while I was in shock. I collapsed on the floor. It was not one of my prouder moments.

However, Jesus tells us that when we see him return, we do not have to faint. We can hold our heads up high. What makes the difference between those who would faint at Jesus’ return and those who would stand up tall?

Dr. Irving Cotto from [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org) explains it this way: “For those who live to step on others, the message of Jesus is a message of judgment and a call to repentance. For those who cling to the promises of God in spite of all the social injuries they have been exposed to, the coming kingdom is a time to look up with hope and celebration. Jesus says, ‘stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near’” (Lk. 21:28).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/advent-christmas-epiphany-2018-19-worship-planning-series/december-2-first-sunday-of-advent-year-c/first-sunday-of-advent-2018-year-c-preaching-notes>

The difference between standing up or fainting when Jesus comes is whether or not you are looking for redemption in Christ. If you only live to serve yourself, you will be very surprised with the Son of God comes back and basically asks, “What have you done with the life I gave you?” But if you trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation and depend on his grace to get you through the most difficult times in life, when the Son of Man finally appears, you’re not just going to be standing, you’re going to be shouting and cheering! “Yes! Finally! He’s here!”

Jesus explains that we will not miss his return if we watch. It’s as simple as figuring out what season it is by going outside and looking at the leaves. If they’re small and green, it’s late spring and summer is on the way. If they are brown and dry, it’s fall; get the snow shovel out.

But preparing for Jesus’ return is not just a one-time thing we do, as if it were just a passing winter storm. We are to practice specific habits, behaviors, and lifestyles daily, to prepare our hearts and our world for Jesus. Look at some of the thing Jesus tells us.

Verse 34: “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.” Three things here stand out to me:

#1 “Carousing” – there’s a good A.C.T. word. It means to live a life of self-seeking pleasure. Going day-to-day trying to make yourself happy at any expense. It is the complete opposite of living for God. You can’t prepare for Jesus if the number one person in your life is yourself and not Christ.

#2 “Drunkenness” – Now, this is not an overall prohibition on alcohol, but if you take it that way, that’s cool. What I think is meant here is any form of “self-medication.” There are drugs aplenty. There is also gluttony, binge-TV watching,

excessive time spent in social media, or any number of substances and devices that dull our senses and rob us of our quiet time with the Lord. When we self-medicate, we impair our ability to see God.

#3 “The anxieties of life.” Seriously, just go back on the church website and read any of my last six sermons. When we wallow in self-pity, worry needlessly, and drown in our grief and anxiety, it is as if a curtain goes up around our spiritual vision. We can’t see past our own trouble, much less see how Jesus is asking us to respond to his call to be ready.

Finally, there is this advice in verse 36: “Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

In other words, don’t take it for granted that when Jesus comes, you will simply stand in a line to get your gold star. That’s self-righteousness, and it has no place in God’s kingdom. Instead, we need to pray, pray again, and pray some more, for the strength and courage to do what God commands us to do. Love. Give. Serve. Fight for justice. Help the oppressed. Lead others to Christ. When Jesus comes back, that is the only time when we can finally say, “Phew! I’m done! There’s nothing more for me to do now.”

When we live in expectancy of Jesus’ return, it gives us greater motivation to experience God’s goodness each day. Every day we live is one day closer to either Jesus’ return or our death. It is inevitable that every one of us will meet Jesus.

But we are not alone in this challenge. We have the saints who have gone before us, as well as the Church here and now. And frankly, all the things that prepare us for the future with Christ also have immediate blessings. When you

practice love, you receive love in return. The same is true for generosity. And patience. And trust. All the things that prepare us for Christ’s return, guess what? They are the same things we can do to celebrate Christmas, grow the church, bless our families, and show love to our communities. It’s not really preparation, after all. It’s simply a choice to serve God in our everyday living. That’s how we prepare for Jesus.

The Bible can be trusted. Jesus will return. Our advantage is, we already know at least half of the story. Christmas is celebrated every year, even though Jesus was only born once. For six hundred years, people heard Isaiah and Jeremiah’s prophecies and wondered, when will it happen? And then at some point, there was a generation who experienced what thousands before them had not: the birth of Christ.

We live in the “yet and not yet” of Jesus’s presence. The first Advent – Jesus’ birth – reminds us of the second Advent – his return. Let us use this holiday to remember that the work of waiting and preparing for Jesus is not yet done. We can still prepare - we must prepare - so when that blessed day comes, we can stand up joyfully in the presence of the Son of Man. Let’s pray.

**Memory Verse: Luke 21:28 (NIV)**

“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

**Reflection Questions:**

1. Do you believe Jesus will return some day? What difference does that belief make in your life?

2. If you died tomorrow, is there anything you would wish had been better prepared? If so, what can you do about it now?
3. How would you feel if you suddenly saw Jesus coming in the clouds? Scared? Joyful? Relieved? Why would you feel that way?
4. What are you doing on a daily basis to prepare for Jesus?
5. How can you help others around you prepare for Jesus?