

Now wait just a minute, Luke! Christmas is coming. Where is the sound of “Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright?” Instead, the Gospel of Luke tells us, “*On the earth nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea... People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*” That doesn’t sound calm or bright! Where is Jolly Old Saint Nick when we need him? I’m wondering why in the world the church suggests a Gospel reading like this one to begin the season of Advent in preparation for the coming of the Christ Child.

Well. There’s a good reason. It’s because the sad truth is we do not live in a “Christmas Wonderland” world. Check your favorite news app or pick up a newspaper, if you can find a print copy. Earlier this week I saw a story online saying, “A Christian businessman from Bethlehem who runs a store that sells hand-carved olive wood Nativity scenes said that tourism in the birthplace of Jesus has dried up, leaving residents struggling to survive. He told the interviewer, “We celebrate Christmas in our hearts. Christmas in Bethlehem was solemn, somber and lonely in 2023, and will be again this year,” The store owner said, “Sadly there will be no celebrations, because there are no tourists.”

Indeed. Talk about, *apprehensive of what is coming on the world!* Peace on earth and mercy mild? Ours is a worrisome world! Not much peace or mercy to be found. Childhood visions of sugar plums are washed away with the tears of grown-up disappointment and despair. Disease and death are constant companions. The fear and foreboding of which Jesus spoke seems to greet us at every turn. As this Advent season begins, we desperately need a strong reminder that this world of misery is not the end of the story.

For me that reminder is right in the middle of this Scripture reading. Jesus states that terrible things are in store. We can understand his imagery as apocalyptic, end-of-the-world imagery, or we can personalize it, and take it to mean all the *hardships* that we must confront throughout the course of our

lives. That is the way I choose to interpret the words of Jesus this morning. Mind you, I'm not one for worrying about the end of the world. I tend to worry more about the here-and-now, the *hardships* of today. In just a few words that jump out at us as if they were printed in flashing neon, we read: "*When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" Yes, Lord! Now we're talking. Disappointment, despair, disease, even death, do not have the final word. So, who does?

GOD DOES!

Quite a few years back, Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks did a very popular series of comedy sketches called the "2000-Year-Old Man" which prompted subsequent hilarious albums (yes, albums, LPs for those of you of a certain vintage). The premise has Reiner interviewing the age-2000 Brooks and inquiring concerning life way back when. At one point, Carl Reiner asks the old man, "Did you always believe in God?"

Mel Brooks replies, "No. We had a guy in our village named Phil, and for a time we worshiped him."

Reiner then quizzically asks, "You worshiped a guy named Phil? Why?"

"Because he was big and mean, and he could break you in two with his bare hands!"

The interviewer asks, "Did you have prayers?"

Brooks answers, "Yes, would you like to hear one? O Phil, please don't be mean, and hurt us, or break us in two with your bare hands."

Then Reiner asks: "So when did you start worshiping God?"

And then this specially worded answer: "Well, one day a big thunderstorm came up, and a lightning bolt hit Phil. We gathered around and saw that he was dead. **Then we said to one another, "There's somthin' bigger than Phil!"** (Carl Reiner & Mel Brooks: 2000 and Thirteen, recorded August 25, 1973 at the Burbank Studios, Burbank, CA)

Amen and Amen! We live in anxious times, as did the people who lived when Christ walked this earth. The good news from the 21st chapter of Luke for the 21st century is that even though these ARE anxious times, so anxious that it looks like the end of the world may be near, *Jesus says we can stand and lift up our heads!* There is somethin' bigger than Phil, and bigger than war, and bigger than disease, and bigger than disaster. Our redemption is near! This also reminds us that Advent is about two comings: The first coming of Christ as a human baby boy *and* his second coming in glory. The book of Hebrews that we turned to in October and November says, "*Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him*" (Hebrews 9:27–28).

Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl is a Bishop in the Lutheran Church. Years ago, in a sermon broadcast on *The Protestant Hour* (November 29, 1998), she recounted an event from Spencer, South Dakota, a community that had recently been devastated by a tornado: "Among the many losses, including six people who lost their lives, was St. Matthew's Lutheran Church. The day after the tornado she walked through the remaining rubble of that community with the pastor of St. Matthew's and the congregation's president and several others. It was an unbelievable sight—a grain elevator twisted and fallen, a water tower toppled, vehicles and other heavy items strewn around like toys on the playroom floor, whole buildings lifted from their foundations.

When we were near the site of the church, looking for signs of where it had been, maybe a half block away, someone called out "THERE'S THE STATUE, THERE'S JESUS!" Sure enough, there it was—the traditional white statue of Jesus that stands at the altar with arms outstretched and a loving countenance. There it (or he) was; a beacon to what had been the site of a 100-year-old congregation's place of worship. The white paint on the statue was nearly gone, and someone later said that one of his arms were broken, but I didn't notice, it was just so remarkable, so moving and so fitting to look up from the chaos around us and see Jesus, arms outstretched, welcoming, and loving his people.

Two girls, helping to clean up in the neighborhood, had taken time to come over to where the church had been and set aside a few items of church property they found scattered in the area. They saw the statue lying in the rubble and figured everyone in Spencer needed to see that Jesus was still there.”

“*Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down,*” Jesus says in verse 34, and lead you to give in to despair. *Look up and look out* for new life instead of numbing yourself to the *hardships* of life. Doing so will give you hope. Live in the reality that weather patterns of this in-between season of Jesus’ comings are carried on two different yet overlapping jet streams. The winds of *hope* will lift you up when the winds of *hardship* knock you off your feet.

Jesus’ closing words from verse 36 have stuck with me this week: “*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.*” The *hardships* are serious enough that getting through this life sometimes feels like we only escape by the skin of our teeth. But *hope* comes from being in the presence of our Redeemer—both on Judgement Day at his return, but also even now through the Holy Spirit. Learning to *look up* and *to look out* for new life is to believe that we are already in God’s presence even while he is still in the process of coming near.

Today we’re hearing Advent’s call to *look up*, to see that Christ is still here, to lift our heads with hope and anticipation, knowing that he is coming again. The Gospel of Luke reminds us to live our lives trusting that he keeps his promises, that Jesus is with us in the chaos and the boredom of our daily lives; in the ordinariness and in the tragedy that life so often brings.

Advent calls out to us with hope, peace, love, and joy. As God’s people we journey through this season together, so as we come to the Lord’s Table today, let us be mindful that Jesus gave us a HEADS UP! The Lord says, “*When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*”

In hardships and hope, this is very good news indeed. The best news ever. Amen!