

Advent 1 (RCL/C)

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

November 27-28, 2021

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Those of you interested in astronomy may have been waiting with great anticipation! But I was clueless, so what I saw in the clear-as-a-bell night sky was a total, catch-me-unawares, beautiful surprise: the lunar eclipse a week ago, Thursday into Friday, November 18-19. One of the pups and I left the house about 5 a.m. When I looked up at the night sky, there it was: a shadow over a third of the moon. I learned later it was the longest lunar eclipse in 580 years: 6 hours and 9 minutes, visible from North America, much of northern South America, northeast Asia and east Australia. Much of the world was able to enjoy the show, accentuated by the fact that the eclipse was of a “blood moon,” so called because it was tinted with the colors of sunset. If you missed it: Google it, and/or mark your calendar (like I have) for this coming May 15, when there will be a total lunar eclipse at 9:32 p.m.

We can witness an eclipse with awe at the beauties of the universe, with appreciation for the creativity of the Creator, and with awareness that eclipses used to cause panic in our way-back ancestors who feared that either the moon or the sun was being “eaten,” bite by bite, by an unknown force and would never appear or shine again. Eclipses, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, other cosmic events or natural disasters were seen as omens, portents of things to come, or the judgment of the gods on humanity. Some of those superstitions die hard. Remember those who falsely preached that the AIDS crisis was God’s judgment on homosexuals? And IV drug abusers? (I don’t know how they explained that hemophiliacs also got swept up in that supposed net of

judgment....) Some who relate to an exceedingly punishing God also view the pandemic as divine judgment. That is not our brand of theology, though.

Scriptures like today's Gospel certainly contribute to some people's belief that war, famine, natural disaster, disease, and cosmic phenomena are signs that God is getting ready to roll up human history like a rug.

"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." (Luke 21:25-26)

We can see why people would be anxious and confused, for centuries, for millennia, because these kinds of things are **always** happening and the world obviously has not ended. Jesus also mysteriously says, *"Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have take place."* (Luke 21:32) Understandably, that left early Christians holding their breath for the next shoe to drop and for Christ to come *"in a cloud' with power and great glory."* (Luke 21: 27b)

This is part of why Paul wrote his letters to the fledgling Christian community in Thessalonica, Greece. Some of them had quit their jobs and were spiritually packing their bags to be ready to leave when Christ returned, any time now. Paul had to tell them, "Too soon! Continue working, earning your pay check, supporting your family, serving the Lord in **this** world. Don't use His promise to return as an excuse for collecting unemployment and spending your days scanning the sky."

Maybe we're more apt to be on the other end of the spectrum: forgetting His promised return, living life on our terms without a thought for what the Lord requires of us, oblivious that God has given **each of us** a role in the coming of the Kingdom. Our gaze is more apt to be focused on earth than heaven. We may forget to ask ourselves, "What does

this have to do with eternity?” when we make daily decisions as well as when we stand at major forks in the road. We may forget that we have been “bought with a price” and our lives are **not** our own to do with as we please. Some day we will be asked to account for how we have lived our life. Will love of God and love of neighbor be the watermark on each page of our autobiographies?

Paul has never struck me as a warm and fuzzy kind of guy, but it’s clear from his letters to the little community of faith in Thessalonica that he loved those folks deeply. He refers to himself as their nurse, their parent.... He was so successful in evangelizing them with the Gospel in such a short time (maybe just 3 weeks?) that he had to hightail it out of town because some synagogue leaders were very upset. We’re not sure if those powers-that-be made it dangerous for him to return, or if his “thorn in the flesh” was acting up, but he says in the letter he’s frustrated and sad that he cannot be with them in person. In today’s reading he prays that God will clear the way for him to visit the Thessalonians again soon.

*And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another **and for all**, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1Thess. 3:12-13)*

The Message paraphrase of that last verse goes like this: “... may the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you.” Love splashing on everyone around us is a great baptismal image. Sophia Grace is baptized this weekend. We believe that in her baptismal dying and rising with Christ, this tiny person mystically receives life, forgiveness and salvation. She is set apart, she is made holy, she is sanctified as a baptized child of God. Her holiness will not be a matter of sitting around quietly with her hands folded, though. Her holiness will be lived out in a life rooted

in prayerful communion with God and branching out fruitfully in love of neighbor. Sophie's life will, by God's grace, abound in love. We pray for Sophie, as we pray for all our children, as we pray for ourselves, that they and we grow in grace as well as in age all the days of our lives.

In the Gospel Jesus says, "*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" (Luke 21:28) Jesus is referring here to signs in the sun, moon and stars, etc., but we've already said that it's dicey to assume a lunar eclipse means the end of the world is approaching. Jesus adds, "*...when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.*" (Luke 21:31) Elsewhere Jesus gives us **other** signs that the kingdom of God is near: the hungry are fed, the homeless are housed, the sick are cared for, the lonely are visited, the captives are set free, the blind see, the lame leap and dance. When that which is broken is mended, God's Spirit is on the wing. When resurrection hope softens sorrow, when light overcomes darkness, "when justice rolls like a river, and washes oppression away," the risen Lord reigns. When we refuse to let the worries of this life weigh us down, when we deeply trust that God's will **will** be done, and God's kingdom **will** come, then we open ourselves up for our Father in heaven to **use us** as channels to answer God's children's prayers.

Our baptismal holiness, our sacramental sanctification, is best shown by our everyday obedience to the commands of Christ, who identified the two greatest commandments as love of God and love of neighbor, and who also commanded, "Love one another as I have loved you." By ourselves, we can't do it. But as the angel Gabriel said to the Virgin Mary, "...nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1: 37) Amen

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