

Sermon – Luke 21:25-36
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
1 Advent – Year C
2 December 2018

“Christmas Counter-Downer”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. When Greta was little and Anders just a baby, one of the sure signs of the season in our house was a Sesame Street DVD, *Elmo's Christmas Countdown*. It tells the story of Stiller the Elf – portrayed by Ben Stiller – who brings the Christmas Counter-Downer to our favorite educational Muppets. Disaster strikes, however, through an act of foolish hope. The elf entrusts the Counter-Downer to Oscar. You know, the Grouch. Who promptly tosses it away, breaking it. It is up to our hero, Elmo – he of the red fur and the annoying, self-referential use of the third-person – to save the day. If the Counter-Downer couldn't be reassembled, they couldn't count down to Christmas. And if they couldn't count down to Christmas, well, then Christmas would never arrive! Of course, Elmo saved the day, every time we watched. *Every. Time.* Believe me, this is not the stuff of classic Sesame Street Christmas specials; nothing here to rival the retelling of *The Gift of the Magi*, featuring Bert, Ernie, a paperclip collection, and a rubber ducky. But I digress. The point is that, as the nominal adult in the room, I found the Christmas Counter-Downer to be, well, a total downer. I grew to loathe that video, my dismay growing exponentially with each rendition of “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas,” which, to be fair, is an excellent song the first 687 times you hear it. On the other hand, nothing helped me get into the spirit of Advent more than Elmo's holiday adventure. It's the sort of thing that made me feel that the end of the world wouldn't be, you know, the end of the world. Elmo again? Come, Lord Jesus!

2. Today is the First Sunday of Advent. Our countdown begins; Christmas is coming! But instead of prophets of old and young couples betrothed, all pointing toward the coming of Bethlehem's baby, we get Jesus on the other end of his life. The Tuesday before Good Friday, to be precise. And frankly, compared to the world's jingle-belling and the ho-ho-hoeing it's all, well, a bit of a downer. Fearful fainting and foreboding? Roaring waves, signing stars, and nations in distress? Heaven and earth passing away? Be on guard lest you be caught in the coming trap? Geez, Jesus. Lighten up? It's almost Christmas; is this any time to be talking about the end of the world? More to the point, is Jesus, finally, someone to be feared? He warns us to be on guard so that the trap does not close upon us unexpectedly. He does *not* say that we can avoid the trap. Is the story we will sing in a few weeks, a story that begins with glad tidings of great joy, finally a story of destruction?
3. The end the world has fascinated its inhabitants ever since the world began. While we mostly dismiss bold prognosticators as oddballs or troublemakers, people are always trying to predict the end of the world, scanning the skies and the headlines for signs and symbols. Many expected the year 2000 to bring apocalyptic events in its wake, and since then a variety of dates have come and gone without bringing the end of the world, in spite of the best guesses by people ranging from Rasputin to Pat Robertson. Perhaps you recall that December 21, 2012 was supposed to bring the apocalypse. At least according to a Mayan prediction, or a misinterpretation thereof that was disavowed by pretty much everyone even before it happened, including anyone who actually knew anything about Mayan culture and history. Still, it was woven into the *zeitgeist* as 2012 drew to a close. I was reminded by the preacher Susan Olson of a meme that appeared on social media as December 21 drew near that year. It was a photo of a sign on a chain-link fence with a Spanish sentence that, when translated, read: "I am not afraid that the world will end in 2012. I am afraid that it will stay the same."

4. I'm not afraid that the world will end. I am afraid that it will stay the same. The point of apocalyptic language, especially in the words of Jesus, is not to create fear. It is to produce repentance; it is a call to change our way of living. We live between times, between the nativity of Jesus, Mary's baby boy, and Jesus, the One who will come in glory and power to judge the world. *This* is the world for which Jesus left heaven, so that he would be Emmanuel, God-With-Us. And *this* is the world that Jesus will return to claim for his own. *This*, in fact, is the world for which Jesus would die not long after uttering these words. Living in between times, what do we see? Well, we see what Jesus said we would. Oceans roaring, signs in the stars, fear and foreboding. The crucial question is not what God is going to do about. God in Christ was born to be with us. God in Christ died to save us. God in Christ was raised to raise us. God in Christ will return to redeem us. We know what God will do, for God has done it, and the words of Jesus promises will not pass away. The question is what will we do to bear witness to the crucified King who will return in the cloud? And the answer is: Stand up and raise your heads. Open your eyes to the Christ who comes to you with redemption. Seeing Christ, we look at the world through his eyes. Until the world ends, may we work in faith so that it is not the same world tomorrow that it is today. Repent. Behold the Savior. And join in his work.

5. Of all the things that Martin Luther almost certainly did not say, my favorite is this: "If I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I'd still plant my apple tree." What we miss, you see, when we speak about the end of the world, is that the world's end is nothing to fear. The end of the world is, by God's grace and power, the final act of reclamation and re-creation. The world is already in pieces. Until Jesus returns in power to put the pieces back together, what better way to spend our waiting time than by turning soil with shovel and planting seeds of life and love and hope wherever we can? Plant the trees today, and leave tomorrow to God. In this time of Advent, you are

the signs of the season; the lighted trees planted in spite of this world's darkness. Planted to bring the gospel of hope and life where once there was only despair and death.

6. The end of the world isn't such a downer after all; as the prophets of 1980's college radio sang, "It's the end of the world as we know, and I feel fine." More than fine, in fact, for the world's ending is the promise that the One who once came down to earth as a mewling baby boy will also be the One who will one day come down to put an end to this world *just so* a new world can be brought into being. A world beyond sin and pain, beyond fear and foreboding, beyond death itself. A world created already by the resurrection of Jesus, the first fruits of the newly planted Tree of Life. As you count down toward Christmas, remember that you are counting down to a birth that has already happened, to a death and resurrection that has already been enacted for your sake. And remember that our wreaths and calendars cannot predict the time and the season of Christ's return. No matter. Stand up, and raise up your heads. Your redemption is drawing near. It's not such a downer after all. For the end of the world won't be the end of the world. No, the end will be a beginning. A beginning without end. For the baby of Bethlehem, the King of glory, will be all in all. Whatever else passes away, his words will endure. In him, we will endure. May we mean it when we say, when we sing, when we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.