

“Why We Need Jesus: To Save the World”  
Isaiah 40:1-10  
Luke 21:25-36  
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The Rev. Christine Chakoian  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois  
The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent

### *Introduction to the Scripture*

A few years ago at our annual preaching group the Moveable Feast, Emory’s New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson (and my one-time professor at Yale), told us about going Christmas shopping with his daughter a few years ago at Lenox Square, one of Atlanta’s largest and toniest shopping malls. “There, amid all the lights and all the displays and all the rush of shoppers, Johnson says he was suddenly overcome by a need to escape. ‘I all of a sudden was struck,’ he says, ‘there is nothing in this place that anybody really needs; and furthermore, nothing anyone really needs is in this place.’” (At the 1998 meeting of the Moveable Feast, personal notes, and cited by Bob Dunham, *Expecting God’s Surprises*, p. 56).

“There is nothing in this place anybody needs; and nothing anyone really needs is in this place.” We know this already, don’t we, that what we really need is not to be found in any mall, or many of the other places we spend time in the frenzy of this season. It may be tautological to say this, but in this season of preparing for the birth of Christ, what we really need is Jesus. Not just the sweet and gentle baby, born in a manger, but the compelling Savior that this baby turned out to be.

So in this brief series of sermons during Advent, I want to focus our attention on Jesus – the one for whom we are preparing and whom we need more than all else in our lives. Over these next few weeks, through the familiar words of Scripture and of carols, we will attend to the profound gift of Christ so central to our faith. As we do, it is my prayer that we will discover again in our familiar traditions that it is not the traditions themselves that comfort us; it is our Savior, Jesus Christ, to whom all of our cherished customs point. Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, let us begin here: with the cosmic Christ, who comes to save the world.

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“It’s the images,” my twin sister Karen moaned about these verses, as she prepared to preach them one Advent at her church in Granville, Ohio. “It’s the images [that get to me]: ‘When the world begins to faint from terror, then stand up and raise your heads! ... Keep praying for strength to escape all these things and so you can stand before the Son of Man.’” (From her 2000 Moveable Feast paper on this passage; unpublished).

“It’s the images,” Karen said: “When I read the verses on the destruction, the images that came into my mind were ... [ones of dreadful, terrifying] natural disasters” – of mud-slides and wind-storms in all their devastating power.

I can relate. Those of us who went on the Work Trip to Ocean Springs, Mississippi were astonished at the swath of devastation still left over a year later from the massive wind and floods – it wasn’t just the intensity of the destruction, but the enormous scope of it – *hundreds* of miles of boarded up buildings and downed trees and small mountains of detritus left in its wake. And anyone watching the news these days would add to these images scenes of man-made disasters: thousands of Hezbollah protestors trying to topple Lebanon’s government; hundreds of Iraqis killed every month in the civil war now enveloping their country. “It’s pictures like those,” Karen says, “that make me feel an inkling of [the gospel] passage’s intensity: anxiety among nations, confusion, people collapsing from fear and dread.”

Which makes us think of Christmas ... how? Just when we’re decorating our homes with poinsettias and swags, buying presents for our loved ones and preparing for holiday parties ... just when the whole town lights up in Christmas splendor, the church – the *church* -- of all places begins the season by hawking anxiety, fear, dread, terror, disasters, and the end of the world.

Welcome to Advent.

It’s every preacher’s dilemma, frankly. At the very moment everyone comes to church to sing the carols, Advent always begins with images like these: death and destruction, wars and rumors of wars, and the second coming of Christ. Yet oddly, I’ve come to welcome this juxtaposition – this tension between our festive preparations for

the gentle child Jesus, and the fiery power of the coming of the Lord. It turns Christmas on its head for me every time. It helps me remember – and yes, I need reminding as much as the next Christian – the juxtaposition helps me remember that we’re preparing not only to welcome Jesus the sweet baby, but that we’re in utter need of who the baby Jesus turns out, in the end, to be: Emanuel, God with us; the Prince of Peace; the Savior of the world.

Not that any of us needs reminding that the world still needs saving ...that this crazy world has despots and crackpots eager to line their own pockets and preserve their own power ... that this world has terrible diseases overwhelming its babies, a scourge of AIDS and malaria and poverty that sentences them to death before they have a chance at life. We don’t need reminding that the world still needs peace on earth, goodwill to all, when some of our own children are fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Darfur, Sudan has become another killing field. I don’t mean to spoil the holiday for you. I mean instead to invite us all to lift up our eyes beyond the cradle to why Christmas matters so very much: as a beacon of hope that our God has not forgotten us; as a spine-straightening reminder that God has willed evil shall not prevail. The renowned old preaching professor Fred Craddock, once told our Moveable Feast group this: “With a baby at Christmas, it’s very easy for [our] perspective to shrink to the size of the crib.” Instead we are invited to “see the cosmic proportions of [our] *God* who comes to us.” (In comments to the Moveable Feast; year unknown.)

And that is just exactly what we find in our Scripture lessons today.

From Isaiah, written when Israel was in desperate straits in exile, we read:

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
 lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good  
 tidings,  
 lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’  
 See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;  
 his reward is with him, and his recompense is with him.”

And from the gospel, in the midst of global shifts of power under Roman rule, and the grab for power the rulers of his day are making, Jesus himself tells us:

“People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. ... 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.”

“Lift up your voice.” “Stand up and raise your heads.” How counter to our basic instincts: Just when the world’s terrors and threats seem overwhelming, the prophet calls us to *lift up* our voice with strength; and when we are ready faint from fear and foreboding, this, Jesus tells us, is precisely when we are to *stand up and raise our heads*, because our redemption is coming near. Look beyond the immediate trials and tribulations, beyond the world that is falling apart at the seams, beyond our personal suffering and struggles ... look beyond this temporal mess to *God* ... God, who created this world in the first place; God, who remembered his people from generation to generation; God, who has not forgotten us now; God, indeed, who comes to us with the promise of salvation. Jesus invites us to lift up our eyes to see beyond our struggles, beyond even the world and its problems; beyond even the sun and the moon and the stars. What is happening is cosmic, and just when we are prone to be consumed with the skirmishes of life on the ground, Jesus tells us to look *up*, stand *up*, to see the stunning power of the Lord our God. We do *not* need to give in to the destruction of the world. We must *not* give in to self-indulgent cynicism or pity. Jesus is telling us: hold your head up. Straighten your spine. Live with endurance, run with courage, discipline yourself with hope. Look beyond your horizon. (Based on work by Karen Chakoian in her 2000 Moveable Feast paper.)

I don’t – I can’t – know what personal struggles you may be wrestling with ... or what world-weariness you carry on your shoulders in this season. But I do know the faithfulness of God, and the power of God to save us still. Some of you were blessed to hear Frank Farwell tell his story recently – a story he’s rarely told, but one that bears

repeating. He was a transport pilot in World War II; like many pilots, he spent his long hours over the Pacific listening to the music played by Tokyo Rose – familiar tunes, toe-tapping numbers that helped you pass the time and remember life at home. Frank was nearly done with one long run he made – he was carrying around 25 men on board, heading to Saipan. He had 100 miles left to go, and he was ready to call it a day.

It was a beautiful day, a crystal clear sky, and he was singing along with the music. Until he heard Tokyo Rose cut in with a message: Yankee pilot, Japan has a present for you. Out in front of him, far in the horizon, he saw a speck moving closer. A Japanese fighter plane, coming straight at him. He knew his plane was slower. He'd never out-run it. He knew his plane was unarmed. He couldn't out-gun it. He obviously knew there was nowhere to land. There was only one choice left. He prayed. And the image that came to his mind – in an instant – was our church's window – the stained glass window of the winged angel, the angel of victory. Calm filled his breast. And then he looked up ... and there, out on the horizon, in the deep blue of the sky, the wisp of a cloud ... and the wisp grew, until a full-blown cloud developed ... a cloud big enough, and dark enough, to hide a small transport plane in.

Look *up*. Stand *up*. Whatever sorrow you bear. Whatever fears you may carry.

“Get you *up* to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift *up* your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities ..., ‘Here is your God!’”

Here, here is your God. Not only the sweet baby in the manger. But also on the horizon, above us, beyond us, who comes with power and might. Amen.