

**LUKE 21:25–36.** (EHV)

“There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. And on the earth nations will be in anguish, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the surging waves, people fainting from fear and expectation of the things coming on the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these things begin to happen, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is near.” He told them a parable. “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. As soon as they are sprouting leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is actually near. So also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near. Amen I tell you: This generation will not pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Watch yourselves or else your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and the worries of this life, and that day may come on you suddenly. For it will come like a trap on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Stay alert all the time, praying that you may be able to escape all these things that are going to happen and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

Have you seen the signs around you? The trees are bare. Snow is beginning to blanket the ground. People are putting lights and decorations up. Liturgical churches like ours get out the blue or purple paraments. Do you know what’s coming? Yes, Christmas. Yes, winter. The signs of the fall season help to prepare us for the cold of the winter season.

But we are in the middle of another season too—a season that spans all four seasons. The signs of this season are also all around us. They too help to prepare us for something. Or at least they should. We might be missing those signs though—perhaps because we mistakenly think that with enough learning, progress, or technology we can undo them and get rid of them, perhaps because we’re too busy trying to ignore them, or perhaps because we’re just too busy, period.

Jesus said, “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. As soon as they are sprouting leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is actually near. So also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.” The signs and the season I am talking about are the signs and the season Jesus is talking about here. The season is the end period of the world’s existence, right before Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead, and the signs of that season are what Jesus tells us about today and what we want to consider today.

This entire chapter is filled with signs that Jesus gives for the end of time, signs that, when we see them, should make us think, “Oh, Jesus is about to return.” The appointed reading starts where it does because Jesus sort of sums up those signs in these verses.

He says, “There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars.” Earlier he had said, “There will be horrifying sights and great signs from heaven.” Just this past April there was a total solar eclipse, the only one this century where its totality was visible from Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Even though our nation tends to look at things more scientifically and doesn’t tend to view phenomena like this as omens of doom or portents of significant events to come like other peoples do and like people more generally did in the past, people still definitely took notice

of it, were talking about it, and it did lead many of those who actually saw it to ask what bigger meaning it might possibly have.

The last total lunar eclipse was in November of 2022. One of the features of a lunar eclipse, depending on where you are located, is that the moon appears to be red, not white, which certainly makes people who see it take notice. In fact, the one in November 2022 was known as the Beaver Blood Moon. The next total lunar eclipse we will be able to see will, God permitting, take place on March 14 of next year. That, too, will be a blood moon.

But these probably wouldn't qualify as "horrifying sights," since they're predictable. However, can you imagine what it was like for the residents of parts of southwestern Russia in February 2013? In the morning they saw an object in the sky hurtling toward the earth, becoming brighter than the sun, and then exploding before impact, leaving a long smoke trail. I imagine there were some who thought their nation was under attack, maybe even some who thought the world was coming to an end. It was in fact a meteor, the largest known natural object to have entered earth's atmosphere since 1908.

But Jesus says there won't just be horrifying sights and great signs in the heavens. He also says that "nations will be in anguish, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the surging waves" on the earth. Now it's not exactly clear whether this is a summary statement or if Jesus is talking about the physical sea. We heard last week that in Daniel's vision the beasts representing four kingdoms came out of the sea; sometimes the sea is used to represent turbulent government affairs. Jesus did say earlier in this chapter that nation would rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. But Jesus could also certainly be talking about the physical seas and oceans. The sea of course caused a lot of anguish for Florida, Tennessee, and the Carolinas this year when Hurricanes Helene and Milton caused billions of dollars of damage.

Jesus also said earlier that there would be great earthquakes, famines, and plagues in various places. There haven't been any great earthquakes lately, but there have been multiple great earthquakes in most of our lifetimes, including a magnitude 7.1 earthquake in Anchorage, Alaska, in November of 2018, which had more than 230 smaller earthquakes in its wake. There are currently no famines in the world, but several years ago there were famines in Yemen and in three African countries. As for plagues or epidemics, there is of course the big one from 2020 and 2021 that is still fresh on our minds.

Jesus said that Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies and destroyed, which happened in 70 AD. German Lutheran hymnals used to contain a copy of Josephus's account of the destruction of Jerusalem, as a reminder of the truth of Jesus's word and of the ultimate destruction of the entire world.

Jesus said that these things would cause anguish and perplexity, and he also warned us believers that these things could cause us to be so overwhelmed with sorrow and worry that we would seek escape of some sort by overindulging in earthly and sensual pleasures and by burying ourselves in work or sports or finances or other earthly concerns. He warned that if we do that, the Last Day will close on us unexpectedly like a trap.

The signs of the season are here, aren't they? The buds and leaves are shooting out of the proverbial fig tree.

The signs that Jesus is coming back and that the end of the world is near are all over the place, yet all around us people seem to grip more and more tightly to a world and a life that is passing away. Ironically, we can see this especially this time of year, when we are, at least on the surface, getting ready to celebrate Christ's first coming at Christmas. We are celebrating that the Son of God kept his word and was born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law—by doing what? Getting buried in the frenzy of commercialism—precisely one of the things Jesus warned us against!

Jesus tells us that seeing these signs shouldn't make us look for escapes, but should make us that much more vigilant in watchfulness and prayer. "Stay alert all the time," he says.

Stay alert all the time by taking note of these signs and not responding with fear or worry, but with the increased assurance that Jesus's words are true. And if they are true, then we should be ready for the final signs Jesus gives—the sun turning to darkness and the moon to blood and the heavenly bodies being shaken and falling from the sky, followed by Jesus coming on a cloud with power and great glory.

Stay alert all the time by staying in his word in general, not just focusing on the signs of the end season, but on all of his word, which gives us peace in the midst of the turmoil of these times, gives us something eternal to latch onto in the midst of all the signs that this world is temporary. Jesus said, "Amen I tell you: This generation will not pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."

There are both promises and warnings here. One promise is that none of these signs is going to lead to a premature wiping out of humanity, so that Jesus returns to a world where everyone is dust and ashes.

One warning is that we will be surrounded by wickedness and corruption until the end. When Jesus mentions "this generation," he seems not just to be talking about his generation like we might talk about Baby Boomers or Millennials or Gen Z. Elsewhere Jesus calls it "this wicked generation" or "this unbelieving and perverse generation," and his apostles follow suit, telling us to save ourselves from this corrupt generation. It seems that they view all generations as culminating in Jesus's generation. Everyone from Jesus's generation onwards is part of the same generation—a generation that has the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promises on clear display for them to see, yet still by and large rejects Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the world. This wicked generation will not pass away until all these signs are fulfilled and Jesus comes again.

But one more promise is that Jesus's words will never pass away. When we cling to his words, we have a firm anchor of eternity in a tossing sea of temporary. Hold on to his word. Use these days of Advent to consider how he has already fulfilled his most important promises to us. Use these days of Advent to consider why God had to send his Son to us and what he accomplished by sending him to us. Use these days to consider how he has enabled us to stand up and lift up our heads when he comes again through the free forgiveness of sins he won for us by his death and sealed for us by his resurrection. When he comes again, we won't have to run for cover and ask the mountains and hills to fall on us and cover us. Meditate not just on his promise to come again some day; meditate on his promises to be with us in trouble and distress right now, to forgive us, to strengthen us, to bless us with all that we need.

This is what it means to stay alert all the time. But Jesus also says to pray. “Pray that you may be able to escape all these things that are going to happen and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.” Pray for yourselves. Pray for others. Pray that we all may recognize the signs of the season, that we all may live in daily repentance, that we all may be ready when Jesus comes again and may stand before him rather than cower before him.

It’s almost winter. Don’t ignore those signs. Get out your warmer clothes. Turn on your heat. Prepare warmer food and drinks like chili, soup, and hot cider. But don’t ignore these signs either, the signs of another season that spans all four seasons, the signs that the end is near. Stay alert using God’s word and pray that you may be able to stand. Then, when this season passes into the next, you will not be hopelessly lost in blackest darkness, but will stand in the presence of Jesus in glorious light forever and ever. Amen.