

---

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen. The word of God that we consider today is from Luke 21: *“But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”*

Brothers and sisters, we will all one day stand before the Son of Man. But sometimes it can be a challenge just to be in an upright position. The little picture in the middle of your bulletin is of Russell from the movie UP. Russell was very excited to help his new elderly friend Mr. Frederickson – Mr. Frederickson tied a bunch of balloons to his house and flew it to South America in search of Paradise Falls. Once they landed, the two of them were pulling the house like a parade float to the destination. But after his initial energy and enthusiasm wore off, Russell got tired, and hungry, and achy, and had to go to the bathroom, and, well, you get the picture. Instead of pulling the house, the house ended up dragging *him* along the ground. It’s pretty funny but it’s also pretty realistic. Last year when we were in the middle of moving, if we were having a particularly exhausting day, Katy and I would say we felt like Russell – this house that we’re so excited about is dragging us face-down through the dirt!

Don’t we all have those days? I want to be excited, strong, and optimistic. I want to be at the top of my game, making good plans and carrying them out...but I feel like my energy tank is empty, I’m already behind on everything and life is just sort of dragging me along. I want to be optimistic about the church and my community and my country and the world...but I look around and I see empty pews in church, and in the world bloodshed and crime, lies, broken promises, and chaos and...it just seems like that optimism is being vacuumed out of the world and we’re left with our faces down in the dirt. The world drags us down. How am I supposed to stand before the Son of Man when standing up on an ordinary day can be so hard?

Here we are at the end of another church year, which means we read Scripture readings that draw our attention to the end times. Here in this long discourse, Jesus begins by foretelling the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. That’s his focus for about the first half of the reading – Don’t get too attached to this beautiful temple. God’s presence on earth is no longer to be found there but rather in the flesh and blood of Jesus. Lest the temple become an idol, know that it will be completely destroyed. And lest you think that Jerusalem is immune to God’s judgment, know that its judgment is near. These prophecies were fulfilled shortly after Luke composed his Gospel – in the year 70, Rome crushed a Jewish revolt by laying siege to Jerusalem and destroying the temple.

But around the middle of the passage, in verse 25, Jesus subtly shifts from talking about the judgment of Jerusalem to the end of the world. And it sounds pretty stressful - *distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world*. We often look around and wonder whether we are living in the end times. And the answer is yes – we

see the tentacles of judgment day stretching backwards in time to the present. We may or may not be at the very end but we know that we are in the last chapter of earth's story. The only thing that still needs to happen is for Jesus to return. But these things can be distressing; it can be easy to be pessimistic and let the state of the world and life pull our faces to the ground and drag us down.

Jesus is coming and he urges us – *“Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.”* Jesus is warning us not to become too preoccupied with worldly things. Life and everything in it is God's good gift to us but we are not to make this life the ultimate end – we are not to make an idol of it. We are not to let ourselves be dragged along like Russell. We are not to have our faces so close to what we're doing in *this* moment that we forget to look up once in a while; forget the bigger picture, that this is not our permanent home. We are strangers and aliens in this world; sojourners passing through on a journey to the heavenly city God has in store for all who love him.

Jesus uses the analogy of being drunk or hung over. Maybe you know what that feels like. It can be enjoyable to temporarily lose oneself and “escape” from trouble and responsibility. But it comes at a price. One who is drunk or trying to sleep off a hangover is not alert, not aware of his surroundings, not able to think clearly about the bigger picture. Likewise we can become so focused on life in this world that our spiritual senses are dulled. Collectively we've been waiting what seems to us like a very long time for Jesus to return and we may have lulled ourselves into false sense of stability; feeling deep down that Christ isn't really coming at all, or at least not in my lifetime. So we fail to be watchful.

So Jesus warns us, *“Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”* Pray for the strength to remain faithful when things fall apart; when life and the world would drag you down. Especially on the good days when we feel strong in our faith – pray all the more for that strength to be maintained when the hard days come. It's remarkable how many prayers you find in prayer books and hymns that have to do with asking God to keep us faithful until our death. We may not be thinking of dying anytime soon but still we are wise to pray for God to keep us in his grace when that day comes.

Because, as we began, Jesus tells us that we will all stand before the Son of Man. Does this sound pretty stressful too? Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead and we're going to have to stand there and give him an account of ourselves. Yikes! There's a lot in my account that I'm not proud of and I'd rather not revisit! Sins I've confessed time and time again; the ghost of shame that I can't seem to banish. The thought of having to recount these things face to face with Jesus drags my heart down into the dirt.

But friends, take heart. Jesus has a good word for us here. As he describes the frightening chaos and tumult that will accompany the end, he tells us, *“When these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”* You who are weary and heavy laden, who feel like life is dragging you along – stand up, hold your head up high! Jesus is not coming to destroy you. It’s not your destruction that is drawing near but your redemption! What is stressful and scary to those who choose to live without God – for us these same things become signs of comfort; reminders to us that we are so close to the end...and the end is a happy one. Jesus is coming. Jesus who came to earth to save us. Jesus who fed the hungry, healed the sick, forgave the sinners, and restored the fallen. Jesus who went to the cross in our place and laid down his life for us. Jesus who defeated death for us, rising from the grave. Jesus who loves us. This is the Jesus who is coming again. There is nothing to fear. Jesus did all of this for us so that we would be *able* to stand in his presence when he comes.

So when he says that we will stand before the Son of Man, that’s not a threat. That’s a promise! We won’t fall. We won’t be dragged down. By his grace, we will be made to stand up straight with heads held high because we are redeemed! And he comes to finish the good work of our redemption. He comes to rescue us from this crumbling and chaotic world.

The bulletin cover features a detail of a painting by Ilya Repin. (If you remember that I used this picture in a sermon 9 years ago, I commend you!) It’s called Barge Haulers on the Volga. As you can see, most of the men are just exhausted. They have been sapped of their will to live. Their energy and enthusiasm are gone. But there is one younger man who stands out from the rest. Unlike the others, he stands tall with his head held high. There is a burning hope in his eyes as he gazes not down to his feet but out to the horizon. And in his hands he clutches a cross, pointing to the source of his life and his hope. This is a picture of each of us in Christ. Though we may sometimes feel weary and dragged down, Jesus invites us to live in hope; to straighten up and lift our heads. Our redemption is drawing near. And when Jesus comes again, with great joy we will stand in his presence. AMEN.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.