

The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.

Advent 1C

Luke 21:25-36

Dear heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit on us so we may be alert but not alarmed when our Lord Jesus Christ comes in his glory. Amen.

How do you feel when you see the police?

I suppose it depends, doesn't it? It can depend on the situation and what you're doing at the time, and may also depend on the state of your conscience!

For example, if you are driving along the road and see the police flash their lights at you and sound their siren, you'll probably take your foot off the accelerator, and do a quick mental and visual check of everything you're doing before pulling over. It wouldn't surprise me if your heart starts beating faster and you're quickly trying to decide whether it would be better for you to be honest or dishonest with your answers to their questions! Even before the policeman or woman starts talking to you, you might experience feelings of fear or guilt, even if you've done nothing wrong!

Or another example: let's say you're sitting at home and the doorbell rings. As you answer the door you see a policeman or woman standing there. While it's possible they could be looking for directions, your heart fears another reason for their visit. Because it's the police visiting, and even before they open their mouths, terror strikes your heart as you mentally account for your loved ones.

On the other hand, if you're in danger or trouble is threatening and you see those lights and hear the police siren; that same sound, those same lights, and those same uniforms which so often strike fear and loathing in most people's hearts, can bring comfort and assurance. As the police arrive you know help is near, authority is near, and justice is near.

In today's text we hear of coming disasters which would normally strike fear in most people's hearts. When Jesus talks of signs involving the sun, moon, and stars, troubles between nations, and surging seas, it sounds terrifying!

In fact, you don't have to visit a movie theatre to see some of these things because sometimes we get to see them on the TV news reports. Just think back over events which have struck fear and terror into so many people's lives, such as the surging seas of Tsunamis, the damaging winds of cyclones, floods, bushfires and earthquakes.

But it's not just natural disasters, because we also fear the man-made disasters such as wars and terrorism being played out over the globe. Thankfully most of us have so far escaped such terrors. However, there may be people among us here today who have experienced their own personal terrors: major car accidents, road rage, physical attack, robbery, addiction, abuse, neglect etc. These too strike fear into our hearts.

Unfortunately, we don't all get to live happily ever after on this earth. People get hurt. Too many are terrorized by sights and sounds and smells. Too many find sleep hard to come by because they're afraid of the nightmares which not only haunt their days, but also their nights. So many people are

afraid, and they've got good reason to be afraid!

Many times we're afraid of what we don't know, but sometimes we're afraid of what we do know and work so hard to avoid, deny, or run away from those things or people. We cower because we're afraid. We fight because we're afraid. We isolate ourselves because we're afraid. We struggle with our faith because we're afraid.

Even though Jesus talks of such signs which make the end of the world sound quite scary, when we stop and think about it, the end of the world comes every day for many people! When someone's life ends, it is the end of the world for them. So, how do you know when your last day has come? And when your last day or moment comes and your breath is taken away, will you be afraid? If you're afraid, what are you afraid of? Are you scared death will hurt? Are you scared what happens to you after you die? Are you scared all your life has come to nothing? Are you frightened because you don't know what will happen to those you love? Are you afraid of standing before your God and Lord and Judge in heaven?

In this way, it's no surprise many people will be afraid when the end comes – either in cosmic events, natural disasters, or even in the personal tragedies of life and death through accident, sickness, and so on. Many people will cower in fear. Many people will be scared of facing their Creator and Judge.

Of course, that's if you're guilty and have something to be afraid of. If you've neglected or rejected the promises of God, you should be afraid. If you've denied the existence of God and his love, then you should cower in fear. If you're faced with an authority which you've rejected and ignored your whole life, living just for now without considering the earthly and eternal consequences, then you should curl up in a helpless ball of terror.

But that shouldn't be any of you.

You see, in the same way the presence of police will strike fear in the hearts of guilty people, the presence of these terrible signs announcing the coming of the Son of Man will strike fear into most people's hearts. But also like the presence of police who come to bring justice and help, and so bring comfort and hope to those in trouble, the presence of these terrorizing signs announces the imminent presence of our Lord and Saviour, who comes to bring you comfort and hope.

Jesus is saying when your end comes, no matter how terrible it may seem, you have no need to be afraid like everyone else with their drooping shoulders and down-turned heads. Instead, Jesus calls you to confidently stand and lift up your heads so you can see your deliverer and redeemer come.

You can do this because you know something the rest of the world doesn't. You know these signs don't announce judgment and punishment for your guilt, because the judgment and punishment for your sins have been fully paid for by Jesus Christ.

You know bad things happen to the bad and good alike because of the brokenness and corruption of sin in the world, but you also know and trust that no matter how your own end will come, you have the promise of eternal life, and nothing can take that away from you.

You also know all people will stand before the Triune God to be judged, but you already know the

result of your own trial before God because you know you're defended by Christ himself and his blood. He speaks for you to say the full time for your crimes has been paid for. Everyone else will be afraid of the result of their trial because they have no defender or redeemer, because they've rejected him or ignored him.

We can stand and lift up our heads with confidence in days of terror and tribulation, but not because of our own behavior or good works. None of us is good enough and we have all fallen short of God's glory. The only reason we can stand in the face of these terrible signs and look up when everyone else is looking down, is because of God's unfading promises to us which are fulfilled through Jesus Christ. Everything and everyone in this world will disappear, but God's word remains forever immovable and unchanging. Our only hope is in the Word of God; the Word made flesh, the one who speaks truth and doesn't lie or go back on his word, but fulfills it for us. God's word, including the promises he gives you which he fulfilled and completed through the life, suffering, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ, will never fade away! With that knowledge, what have you got to be afraid of?

This is what Advent is all about. Advent isn't about the ringing of cash registers, or about taking photographs with jolly fellows, or about endless Christmas carols which sing of snow and reindeer. Advent is about the coming of your deliverer and rescuer. Where everyone else is alarmed, you instead stay alert in anticipation of your coming Saviour and redeemer.

When you're in trouble, when you're in pain, when you're struggling with yourself or with others, when disaster strikes, when loved ones die, and when you feel like crawling into a black hole of depression, don't look at the sin, the pain, the guilt and the darkness, but look to the promises of God. God's promises give you hope so you can stand up when everyone else cowers in fear. God's unchanging word to you gives you reason to lift your heads when everyone else is hanging theirs.

God promises that even in tragic and tumultuous events, God's gracious purposes are being worked out and his divine promises are being kept. Even though it may seem like the world and our lives are out of control, God's word of promise is given to you so that you won't be drawn into despair or cynicism.

So, today's gospel reading isn't supposed to be scary for us, the people of God, but it's rather a word of hope and comfort for us to whom the promise has been given, which we receive by faith. These words are to encourage us so we may persevere in hope, continue with the art of prayer, keep bearing witness to God's love for us, and endure to the end knowing the cosmic purposes of God have been decisively worked out and fulfilled in Jesus Christ...for each one of us.

And may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.