

# Redemption is Near

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*Text: Luke 21:25-38*

Redemption is near.

Next Saturday marks the 77th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a day that will live in infamy, as President Roosevelt said. It marked the beginning of the entry of our country into a long and costly war that mobilized nearly every American into the fight. But as I thought about our scripture today, I was thinking about a different World War II story. In the film *Saving Private Ryan*, General George Marshall learns that the Ryan family has lost three of its four sons, and he gives orders for the surviving son, James, to be located and returned home. A squad of eight men sets out to recover James, and does so at the cost of several lives. Many years later, James Ryan visits the grave of one of the men who rescued him, begins to weep, and expresses the hope that the life he has led was worthy of their sacrifice. He knew that he had been favored by an act of redemption.

Your redemption is drawing near, Jesus says to his disciples. What does that word, "redemption," mean? It originally referred to the purchase of freedom of a family member who had fallen on hard times and sold themselves into slavery to pay a debt. But this was not merely an economic transaction, not a simple trade of money for a person's freedom. Redemption was about the honoring of the covenant bond of family. It was about not leaving someone who matters trapped and alone. It was about showing someone that they haven't been forgotten, and that a new kind of future was possible.

When Jesus refers to the image of the "Son of Man coming in a cloud," he's referring to the book of Daniel, which was written during the time of the Jewish people's fight against the oppressive Seleucid Empire, which had banned the Torah and erected a statue of Zeus in the Temple in Jerusalem. By that time, "redemption" was something the people looked to God to accomplish. Had God forgotten them? Had God forgotten God's covenant promise to be their God, and to claim them as God's people forever? Or was there to be a rescue and restoration of the Jewish people's dignity and freedom to live as God's covenant people? The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah celebrates the miraculous intervention of God in their successful struggle, an act of redemption, which neither Jesus nor his followers would have forgotten.

The rest of Jesus' words are aimed at kindling hope. The heavens will be in disarray, he says, the kingdoms of the earth and the seas will be shaken. But do not be distressed and dismayed, Jesus says. No, instead, lift up your heads, because just as the trees show you the changing seasons of nature, so these things are meant to show that the time of redemption is at hand. Think about that... when the world around you looks to be at its most hopeless, when all the signs point to chaos and catastrophe, Jesus dares to claim these as signs of hope. He dares to urge us away from despair and dissipation, to be alert and strengthened by prayer, so that we might be ready when redemption comes.

The season of Advent is about getting ready. The word "advent" comes from the

Latin *adventus*, coming. Advent invites us to stretch out in expectation, eagerly awaiting new bits in an unfolding story. It's like those Advent calendars where you open doors to show a new part of the picture, maybe a Nativity scene. (The best Advent calendars, as everybody knows, have chocolate behind those doors.) As we read the words of prophecy during this season, we get caught up in anticipating the unfolding drama of what God is doing in the world. And because what God is doing in the world is not just "out-there"; because in this story God is made known to us as "God-with-us", Immanuel, a Messiah who lives with and suffers with and dies for his people; because this is the kind of story that is unfolding, then our getting ready in Advent involves not just looking "out-there," but looking "in-here." Is your heart open to the miracle that is about to happen? Is there room for God's Word to become flesh *in you*? Are you *ready* for Christmas? Are you ready to welcome Christ into the world?

Advent is about getting ready. And not just for Christmas. The story we receive as Christians reveals to us the baby Jesus swaddled and lying in the manger so many years ago, but also the triumphant Christ who will come back to us bringing a new heaven and a new earth, "the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory," as Jesus says. Are you ready for God's kingdom? Are you ready for a world where the light of God's holy goodness fills all things, and the dark corners of your own life must yield to God's loving, transforming power? Or are there parts of you not yet ready to acknowledge God's rule in your life? Are you ready?

Getting ready means cultivating watchfulness. It means remembering what is important in the face of distressing distractions. Jesus knows that in just a short time, his disciples will be on their own. Maybe they'll be tempted to go back to Galilee, pick up their fishing nets, and continue their lives as though nothing had happened. But they can't do that now that they know, now that they know the terrible and wonderful things that are about to happen. Jesus warns them, saying, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap." Watchfulness means stepping out of our routines to take stock. Do I relate to my family and my neighbors in a way that honors God? Do my career, my habits, and my relationships build up my faith, or do they make me anxious, cynical, or numb? When you enter the story and look back through time at yourself from the day Jesus describes, what really matters?

Advent especially is a time for remembering that God doesn't stand apart from this world, just watching from the sidelines. God came into the world, unmistakably and irrevocably, in Jesus Christ. And God will come again. As we cultivate watchfulness, as we struggle to bring our lives in line with the new reality God is creating, we are also nurtured in the hope that the God who came into our world *sees* us, *remembers* us, *loves* us, and *holds* us. As we learn to affirm this truth in the face of life's darker moments, lifting up our heads in Jesus' words, our eyes come off of the ground, and we are more able to see God at work in our world. So getting ready means nurturing hope.

Finally, getting ready means growing strong through prayer. It means realizing that our watchfulness and our hope are gifts that we need to ask for again and again. "Be alert at all times," says Jesus, "praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place..." Pray for alertness, he says. Pray for watchfulness and hope in difficult times, so that they don't overwhelm you. These things aren't character traits that we earn or own. They're God's gifts to us, but we need to ask for them. Getting ready for Christmas, and for the kingdom, means growing strong in relationship with the living God, who lovingly transforms us and prepares us, as Jesus says, "to stand before the Son of Man."

This Advent, take time to get ready. Take time to cultivate watchfulness, to look at your habits, your routines, the things that are important to you--do they have a place in God's coming kingdom? Take time to nurture hope, affirming God's presence, God's light in the dark winter seasons of our lives and our world. Take time to know God, and to allow yourself to be changed and strengthened in prayer. Redemption is near, lift up your heads, take courage, take hope! Amen.