



**Sunday, December 1, 2024**

**First Sunday of Advent**

**Luke 21:25-36**

**“The Light is Winning”**

**Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

Every morning I try to get up early when it is still dark so I can watch the dawn slowly spreading across the sky. On cloudy days it’s just a murky grey. On other days when God’s fingers have arranged the clouds just so, it’s a dazzling panorama of shifting and brightening colors that change every minute. Gray or pink or bright orange, the result is always the same: In the words of 1 John 2:8, “the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.”

As I was thinking about that verse, a breathtaking scene sprang to mind from the last episode of Season 1 of the HBO show “True Detective.” Yes, I know, it was 10 years ago. I might not remember where I put my keys this morning, but some things stick with you. Maybe you recall that this first season starred Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson as a pair of homicide detectives who pursued a killer over a 17-year timespan. The chemistry between the two actors and their opposite characters is riveting—Woody Harrelson being disciplined, hardworking and focused on the here and now, and Matthew McConaughey wild, mystical, and deeply intuitive.

In the closing scene of that episode, McConaughey is in intensive care. He had trapped the killer but was left for all but dead until Harrelson rescued him. But he can’t stand the confinement, so begs Harrelson to get him out. Harrelson puts him in a wheelchair, still in his hospital gown, and rolls him out into the night. When they are a safe distance away, they pause, looking up into a dark starry sky.

Harrelson says he remembers McConaughey telling him how he used to make up stories about the stars. “Tell me one now,” Harrelson begs. “It’s just one story,” McConaughey explains, “the oldest: Light versus dark.” Looking up, Harrelson says soberly, “Well, it seems to me that the dark has a lot more territory.” McConaughey agrees, “Yeah, you’re right about that,” as Harrelson lifts him out of the wheelchair and they stagger toward the car.

Then he adds, “You know, you’re looking at her wrong, the sky thing.” “How’s that?” Harrelson asks. McConaughey replies, “Once there was only dark. If you ask me, the light’s winning.”

Yes. The light *is* winning. Starting today we begin telling the story of the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ all over again, and our faith will be strengthened in the telling and hearing as it is every year.

The light *is* winning. We know that. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” But at times the light can be eclipsed by the vast territory of darkness around us. There is so much suffering in the world, so much poverty, so few resources for the vast

majority of human beings on earth. At our Soup Suppers we are learning how many people in the Hatfield/Lansdale areas are living in their cars. These are the lucky ones – they have cars.

At the other end of the spectrum, the global economy is producing a record number of billionaires. Americans are leading the pack. America's 800 billionaires are now collectively worth a record \$6.2 trillion – half again as much as the entire economy of Japan. What do billionaires do with their money? Mainly, use it to grow their wealth even further by investing in assets like stocks, bonds, real estate, private equity, hedge funds, commodities, and collectibles.

Meanwhile, people are hungry. Oxfam estimates that \$23 billion is needed to address extreme hunger, and an additional \$14 billion to address chronic hunger. 49 million people in 43 countries across the world are at risk of falling into famine or a hunger emergency. Nearly one in ten people go to bed hungry every night. Three billion people cannot afford a healthy, nutritious diet. Almost half of all deaths among children under five are related to malnutrition. More than 150 million children around the world miss out on daily meals. The 73 million children in extreme poverty attend school on an empty stomach, causing an impact on concentration and learning.

Couldn't the world's 1100 billionaires pool their funds and proportionally donate even just a slice of their earnings to alleviate hunger, complex though that solution would be? Would any of them even feel a difference in their own bottom lines? Yet how great the impact would be.

And in the meantime, what of our earth? You may be thinking "Baby, it's cold outside," but we are dealing with record-breaking sea surface temperatures, the hottest Northern Hemisphere summer in 2000 years, and the breaking of many other climate records. Glaciers are melting, polar bears and penguins are losing their habitats. Catastrophic weather events are becoming almost common.

Even well-meaning plans can backfire: A few years ago the US-led push toward biofuels to reduce carbon emissions resulted in huge areas of Indonesia's rainforests being razed, so that vast groves of oil-palm trees could be planted for the harvesting of valuable palm oil. But the accelerated destruction of these rainforests released massive amounts of carbon into the atmosphere from the disturbed soil and destroyed trees—in one year, more than the entire state of California or the continent of Europe.

OK – by now you are ready to throw me out of the pulpit. But what of our gospel reading today, a terrifying picture of the end times? These are hardly the tidings of comfort and joy you might expect to hear as we enter Advent. Yet it is precisely what we need to give us a cosmic perspective from which to enter into the story of Jesus Christ. In the midst of prolonged suffering, when on the horizon of history we can see no relief, faith turns us toward God—not only for a revelation of God's ultimate will for all of creation, but also for a vision of how the light of Christ breaks into our darkness and announces the beginning of the age to come—the age of the kingdom of God.

For it is here, at the farthest edge of hope, that our senses become heightened as we wait and watch for salvation. The nights are long, yet we crave that first lightening of the sky. The times are dark, yet we dare to hope and pray for peace and reconciliation. Where do we find these signs?

Until a miracle happens and the world's wealthiest experience an epiphany of generosity, we must look for signs of hope in things not great, but small. In the hands of those who give, when all they have to offer is their labor. Hands that serve a meal to warm the soul. Hands joined in a newfound community of friends with which to share the journey.

Jesus' metaphor of the fig tree is perfect: As soon as you see it sprout leaves, you know that summer is near. Be on the alert! Didn't we just sing about this? "With hearts and hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord to see / the day of earth's redemption that sets your people free."

This Advent, be especially vigilant in practicing the discipline of waiting and watching. We wait in breathless expectation for the birth in human flesh of the Word who was with God in the beginning. We watch for the Savior who has come down to us, God in human form, because we know that without him, we would be lost forever. We hope against hope for the one who will free us from the chains of death, who has come from God specifically *for us* and gave his life *for us* so that we might never again know the harness of guilt, the bridle of jealousy, the straitjacket of pride or the dungeon of fear.

Be watchful. Pay attention. Give yourself over to random acts of kindness. Cherish as truth each sprout that bursts forth as a sign of the arrival of God's kingdom on earth, each one proving that God's love is being poured into human hearts through Jesus Christ. Yes, the light IS winning: Praise the one who breaks the darkness with a liberating light!