

The Believer's Telescope
NOVEMBER 28, 2021 1st Sunday in Advent
Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

Theme: Looking forward to Jesus' arrival (both first and second comings)
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Have you ever used a telescope? What's its function? Why would you own one? Right. To see things that are far off. And what do people usually look at with a telescope? The stars! And what do we call people who study the stars and the planets? Astronomers. And if they look at the stars in order to predict events on our planet or in our lives, we call them.... Astrologers.

How does this connect to the season of advent? What is the role of astrologers, or people who use telescopes in our preparations for Christmas? Well, advent means *looking forward*. As we look forward to Christmas, don't you set up your telescope next to the tree? Maybe not. Well, as we set up the nativity scene, the three wise men are central figures. We're told they were actually astrologers. They'd been studying the stars and noticed an unusually bright star shining in the east which their study told them portended the birth of a new king. The star was far off, and its presence went unnoticed by most people living in Jerusalem and the surrounding country. Yet God was providing a sign prior to the occurrence of a momentous event in human history.

The birth of Jesus Christ to a humble carpenter and his wife, in an insignificant village in a powerless community, changed the trajectory of millions of lives. The event was foretold in some ancient text studied by a very few wise men who knew enough to take action when they saw the star illuminated on God's heavenly jumbotron.

Today, we read Luke's account of Jesus' words describing his second coming and the signs which will foretell it. Here too the sun and moon and stars play a key role. Get out your telescopes and watch for unusual sights. Luke's passage does not tell us exactly what to look for in the heavens, but we know from John's vision in Revelation that when the third angel sounds his trumpet, which takes place after the rapture of the true believers, a great star will fall from the sky and contaminate a third of earth's water. Then, when the fourth angel blows his trumpet, a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars will be darkened, dampening the light of the day and the night (Rev 8:10-12). This is thought

to be mere symbolism by some, but if it's meant literally, I don't think the event will be overlooked by anyone, telescope or not.

Folks, we are nearer to the second coming of our Lord than we have ever been before. His return is the last great event we will experience before the curtain descends and the reign of Satan is over. In the interim, in this dark world, we are to be a light to those around us. God has already determined the hour. Christ's return is certain and irreversible. As we get closer and closer to the judgment day, let me urge you to get right with God. I'll quote the words Hosea spoke to Israel in **Hosea 14:2**, "Return to the Lord and let this prayer be your offering to him: "Forgive all our sins and accept our prayer, and we will praise you as we have promised." We as a society have turned away from the moral imperatives of the one true god and instead chosen to follow our own depraved ideas of right and wrong. And just look at how successful it's been: 30% of teenage girls in America will have been pregnant at least once by the age of nineteen. Suicide among teens has increased 300% in the last 30 years. 1 in 5 teachers has been threatened in the classroom. At least 61% of American males view pornography on a regular basis. These sad statistics are especially interesting when you consider that only 20-25% of Americans say they have no religious affiliation, so a good portion of those pregnant or suicidal teens are supposed Christians. A good portion of those men looking at porn every week are self-professed Christians. America has strayed seriously off course and we need to help people recalculate their routes going forward.

Advent is a season of looking forward. We look forward to celebrating the birth of the only person capable of saving humans from the curse of Adam. And on a daily basis, not just during Advent, we should be anticipating the rapture and the second coming of Christ. We should be knowledgeable about the signs that point to this event. Every day now, we can wake up and look forward to the establishment of the new heaven and the new earth. In **Romans 13:11** Paul tells his church: You must do this, because you know that the time has come for you to wake up from your sleep. For the moment when we will be saved is closer now than it was when we first believed."

Believers in Christ are like homeowners who have seen the signs of decline in their neighborhood and have therefore banded together with their neighbors on a neighborhood watch. They alert each other to unusual activities and help each other to stay safe. So many of us go around

looking down instead of looking ahead. How often have you seen someone walking along looking at their device as they walk, narrowly avoiding other people, oblivious to traffic. Last week as I was driving in Plymouth a girl stopped dead in the middle of crossing the street to answer a text on her phone. By her action she gave testimony that the idea of 'survival of the fittest' is a myth. Be aware of what's happening around you. The self-centered living being promoted today blinds people to the dangers looming ahead.

The mention of "the fig tree and all the trees" suggests that the past can help us to make sense of the future. When buds begin to form on the bare branches of trees we are confident that winter is ending and summer is on its way. Why? Because we have previously lived through the change of seasons, or because others have told us of their experience of it. Do you not think that we are seeing the signs now of a change such as Jesus foretold? He warns us in Luke 21:9 "When you hear of wars and disturbances [civil unrest, revolts, and uprisings], do not panic; for these things must take place first, but the end will not come immediately. In v.11 he reveals, there will be violent earthquakes and famines and plagues and there will be terrible sights and great signs from heaven. Surely we have seen all these and more in recent years, and don't be fooled into thinking that it's due to man's impact on the environment. We are not that powerful. God is warning us and at the same time, giving us a great opportunity to testify about Him.

Most people live as if "that day" will not occur in their lifetime. It's in the "some day" category.... As in, *some day* I am going to clean out that storage shed. I guess it's human nature – we focus on the immediate priorities with our limited time each day. We don't want to waste time or energy preparing for an event that might not happen and which we cannot control. For that reason, I suspect that most of us don't feel confident that we are ready for Jesus' re-appearance. And yet, the better your relationship with Jesus, the more you will long for his return.

There were parallels to this in the days before Jesus' birth as well. People talked about God's promise to send a messiah to save them, but their hopes had faded as the years went by and the event was relegated into that vague future *someday*. Jerusalem was completely devastated in the Babylonian invasion of 587 BC, and the inhabitants of Israel were either subjugated by new rulers at home or exiled from their homeland, living as

slaves and refugees. For those living in exile, their way of life had been completely disrupted. The hope for rescue remained unfulfilled for hundreds of years. And yet, God sent his prophet Jeremiah to strengthen their resolve to endure and to revive their hope for the future. Jeremiah's words foretold Jesus' reign, when he said: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety" (Jeremiah 33:14, 16a). Trusting that God means what he says, is evidence of faith. We are to rely on God's promises to get us through all our earthly trials. Jesus tells his disciples in v. 19 "By your patient endurance you will gain your souls".

Not everyone wants to trust his future to God's guidance. **Consider Herod's reaction to the news from the astrologers that a new king would be born in his territory. He immediately felt that his control was threatened and took action in an effort to invalidate the prophecy.** While Herod was not the best of rulers, his paranoia kept him alert to possible threats emerging from any quarter, no matter how far off.

As Christians we should be alert and ready for the coming of the end. We should therefore not be caught up in either the excessive pleasures or worries of the day, but rather remain watchful.

We must also remember that's God's way is often different than ours; events may not match our expectations. The wise men went first to Herod, expecting that the birth of a new king would take place in the palace, but they didn't find anything there and when they *did* get to the end of their quest, the baby wasn't in a palace but a stable. The parents were not rulers themselves but tradespeople. Fortunately they didn't second-guess themselves and turn back.

Another sign that the second coming is near is the increasing persecution of Christians who will not compromise with the secular standards. In the final days, the Bible says, good will be called evil and evil will be called good. No religion will be allowed to contradict the accepted truths. We are already running into that now when we condemn abortion or gay marriage. Jesus says in 21:17 that we will be hated by everyone because of our association with His name. Labelling someone as a Christian, will endanger them just as much as it did in the first century. And as these times approach, Jesus envisions "people fainting from fear and expectation

of the dreadful things coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” (v26). That last phrase reaffirms Paul’s revelation that we are not battling flesh and blood but rather the powers and principalities of the spirit realm. Battles will be raging in the unseen world. The angels of light and the demons of darkness will be fighting for control and we are lending our aid to God’s holy warriors as we put on our spiritual armor, and remain faithful, praying, speaking God’s word, and worshipping. We can win every battle the enemy wages against us because we have Jesus’ name and Jesus’ blood to use against him. As born-again believers, Christians should be confident, even eager for the events Jesus describes as they herald the coming deliverance of the Christian community. The days leading up to the end times may be scary for those who love justice, and dangerous to evangelizing Christians, but those days will be even more dangerous to unbelievers. Whether they realize it or not, the signs Jesus describes indicate that the time for salvation is growing short. Jesus warns us in v 35 that “it will come on you suddenly, like a trap” and no one on earth can avoid it. Can you picture those movie scenes where people walking through a jungle are suddenly caught in a trap, suspended in a net above the trail? The person did not perceive the threat- no sight, no sound to warn of the danger ahead.

We are in the church era, the ‘time of the Gentiles’. When this era, what Jesus called *this generation*, ends, God will turn his attention back to Israel, his favored nation. When the current era ends, the church will be raptured and the saints will rise up to meet Jesus in the air. The church has been hoping and looking skyward now for hundreds of years, just as the Israelites hoped and hungered for a messiah since 587 BC. Don’t risk being unprepared for Christ’s arrival, as they were. And no matter what happens, cling to God’s promises, and to the hope that springs from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

If anyone here has not yet accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and would like to do so today, I urge you to see me at the close of service and I will pray with you and walk you through the 3 simple steps required to be born again so that you may become a new creature in Christ. As Christians, living in this in-between age, we keep our telescopes trained on Jesus, who said in Rev 22:16 “I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the radiant and bright Morning Star.” As we celebrate Christ’s birth in the manger, We also look up,