

## Luke 21:25-28

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heaven will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

## 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

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On this first Sunday of Advent we are still savoring our Thanksgiving Dinner, remembering our times with family and friends -- and -- also writing a gift and shopping list and wondering where we might place the Christmas Tree this year. We love the Thanksgiving and Christmas Seasons! But there is more to Advent than cleaning, cooking, decorating, and shopping.

Advent is a time not only to prepare ourselves spiritually for the coming of the Christ Child, the True Light of the World, but also to settle in, to wait, reflect, and recommit to our faith in God's promises; for during Advent we stand between the past -- as we remember the birth of Jesus, and the future -- as we wait for the Second Coming of Christ, which has been proclaimed today in the Luke and 1 Thessalonians passages.

All the Bible readings we have read today declare that, although throughout history the world has been mired in devastation, despair, and fear, God's steadfast love revealed in the person of Jesus will overcome all evil powers, restore the desolate land, and bring hope for the future.

God's people have been waiting and hoping for the Second Coming of Christ for a very long time, when Christ will once again reveal himself to the nations to judge and redeem.

Luke's gospel tells us that Israel is about to be trampled, and that it is a sign of the End of History -- "The End" that begins with Jesus' return. These "signs in the sun, moon and stars, distress among nations, confusion of the roaring seas and the waves," will be cataclysmic; and God's return will be visible to all of us. We will see it ourselves, and faint from fear and foreboding, for we will be overwhelmed with the almighty power of our God, who shakes heaven and earth like a rag doll! Then we will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with great glory. And through our shaking, in absolute fear, we will recognize that The End has come. However, instead of shrinking beneath such awesome power, we are told to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption -- and ultimate protection -- is drawing near.

We will all see it, and experience it, and finally witness the awesomeness of our God; but for now we must wait in **the darkness of not knowing** when it will be.

The word, "darkness," is used in many ways in the Bible to describe judgment, misery, obscurity, sin, ignorance, and death, and also "lack of understanding." If we cannot understand, we are in darkness. And sure enough, when the light of God-With-Us comes into the world, the world does not know him. Though Jesus comes to those who are in darkness and under the shadow of death, they love darkness more than light, and their lack of understanding has tragic results. On the day Christ dies, darkness descends on the land from noon until three. Jesus the Christ has come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in him shall not remain in the darkness, but some people just cannot be helped. The Book of Jude verse 13 describes them as **wandering stars**. He says they are "Wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; **wandering stars**, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved for ever."

Yet that is not the whole story about darkness. In Genesis, Abraham's **personal darkness is a loss of hope** of ever having a child. The old man is deep in doubt about whether God's promise of children will ever come true. He and his wife Sarah have been waiting so long that hope is fading with each passing day. All they know is that God had said it would be "soon," but soon had never come. So when God says the next time, "Do not be afraid, Abraham, I am your shield; Your reward shall be very great" -- Abraham decides to

point out the obvious to God: “You have given me no offspring,” Abraham says bluntly, “and so a **slave** born in my house **is to be my heir**.” God does not argue with him. Instead, God tells the old man to go outside and look up at the sky. “Count the stars if you are able,” God says to Abraham, for “so shall your descendants be.”

This was not something that could have happened in the middle of the day! The **dark, night sky revealed abiding hope** in the **twinkling stars**, and renewed Abraham’s commitment to muster his faith and trust God.

In October, Steve and I drove to the Grand Canyon to meet my brother and his wife for a short reunion. On our last day there, we decided to walk the rim of the canyon until we found the hiking path that led to the bottom of the huge expanse. We used our binoculars throughout the day, and imagined the hike and the physical demands a full day of hiking would require of us. We watched the tiny figures of people that the naked eye could not see as they walked on the floor of the canyon and then along the switchbacks as they climbed back up, on the way to the top. LeeAnn and I decided that once we found the trailhead, we would hike down with the daylight that was left.

Now it was well past 5PM; but finding the trailhead filled us with excitement! We waved to our husbands and started down the trail . . . and 15 minutes later we fully realized our time limitations: we had seen the first stars of evening on the horizon . . . and turned around to return to the top of the rim. If only we had been better prepared!

Later, in the gift shop, we noticed a T-shirt that boasted: “I Walked the Canyon.” We laughed and asked each other, “Should we buy it?” (We were so tempted.) Yet, we knew that hiking for 30 minutes was not enough to deserve the shirt! Our **half-hearted hope** of walking the canyon was not the **deep, abiding hope** that Abraham had **chosen to embrace**.

Luke tells us that The End of the World and Second Coming begins with Jesus’ return. God’s return will be visible to all and will be apocalyptic in nature as he breaks through history in a marvelous yet fearful way as the Creation shakes with the foreboding power of God. And Jesus the Son of Man will appear, coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

During the days of Advent, remember the stars in the night sky, those **tiny lights of hope and constancy that are so much larger than we can perceive** yet which **have always been there**; to commit our lives to our faith and the hope that God-in-Christ offers so freely; and like Abraham, to choose hope. God’s promises are more numerous than the stars in the sky, and he encourages us, even when **we are wandering stars**, to count them all!

Our life with Jesus is more than a 30-minute hike and a T-shirt that commemorates it, for that would have been a “soft trophy” of no real achievement! A life of faith is a lifetime of spiritual growth, as the Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.”

This present life’s road offers no guarantees of success or appreciation from others, but is focused on the life of Jesus and all that he has done for us and will do in the future.

It is about the birth, life and death of the son of God,  
come to earth as a tiny babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and  
lying in a manger-

who grew up to be the Savior of the World –  
who has died, but who will return to save us all.

We remember the holy birth – the brilliant guiding star in the night sky -- with the angels in bright raiment singing, “Glory to God in the highest! Peace and goodwill toward men!” We recall Jesus’ ministry, who was sent to teach and heal, and show us how to act and interact with his people, in the spirit of selfless love and reconciliation. Our focus remains on him and his ministry, which brought hope to a divisive, ailing, desperate world of human suffering and unknown outcomes. Our hope during Advent is that Christ will come again in glory. Who can we trust to save us from this beautiful yet perplexing world? Our only hope is in the love of God through Jesus Christ until he comes again to save and restore.

We reflect on the daily life of Jesus as he walked along the beaches of the sea of Galilee, calling ordinary men, women, and children to follow - and listen and learn of the better life he has for them.

We wait for his second coming, and in the meantime, we are called to love all children of God, to pass on our faith with a ministry of reconciliation with everyone, for we in turn have become those whom God has sent to be the reconcilers. In doing these things, we will have much more than a T-shirt that reads, “I Walked the Canyon;” we will have lived a rewarding life because we have shared our faith in acts of love for the benefit of others.

Jesus had no preconditions or expectation of his first disciples except that they follow him and learn from him – to break out of the darkness into the full light of understanding that we live and walk on the basis of God's goodness, not our own. We focus on his purpose, a single purpose that leaves us as the benefactors of the greatest gift of all – a relationship with our God that gives life, everlasting goodness, light, and peace.

God is the source of Hope -- our only hope, it is very clear -- just look up to the dark night sky this Advent Season! Put on your heavy coat and step outside into the cold; immerse yourself in the darkness and contemplate the wonder of the radiant stars that reveal the constancy of the universe; and if needed, fix your **wandering star** to the steadfast faithfulness and truth of God: that, as surely as he was with Abraham, he is with us now.

Let us pray: Lord of all stars, teach us your ways, those that bring us to a richer, deeper faith in you. Help us to count the stars of the dark night all around us. Give us hope that you and your promises are permanently imbedded in the lights that we see. Amen.