In the past few weeks, I've developed a habit that I know isn't good for me. I've gone from checking the news once or twice a day to checking it 5 or 6, or even ten times a day. First thing in the morning, before I've even had breakfast, I'll flip open my tablet and go to a news site, holding my breath while looking to see if someone or some group has committed an act of terror somewhere in the world. I find my anxiety level rising with each new piece of news or each prediction of where violence could erupt next. I find I'm lingering on news stories much longer than I normally would, trying to make sense of acts that ultimately make no sense except in some twisted way to those who perpetrate them. I go out to lunch with a friend right after the Paris attacks. Our talk begins with our shared sadness and outrage and my friend remarks, “I think this is the beginning of World War III.” I find no reasonable argument against what she says, for it seems inevitable that the violence wrought by terrorists will generate more violence as a response, until much of the world will resemble a powder keg, ready to explode at any time.

I know I am not alone in my fear and anxiety. Dread and foreboding hang over our country and our world like thick, dark storm clouds, ready to empty themselves on those already drowning in their fears. Even as we wait and worry, we realize that without striking again, those we name terrorists are getting the results they want: plunging the world into fearful anticipation of what **might** come next.

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. The powers of the heavens will be shaken.” One way to read these words is as a prediction of what will happen on the earth when, as Luke writes, “The Son of Man comes in a cloud with power and great glory,” to redeem a broken world in its last days. The Bible is full of predictions of Jesus' coming to oversee the passing away of a sinful world and establish a new world that is the true home of all believers. It is not unfeasible to look at what is happening around us and wonder if the end times have arrived in our lifetimes. Certainly, many, many generations have believed it would happen in theirs.

In the meantime, there is another way to hear Jesus' words. Signs in the sun and moon, distress among nations, people fainting from fear and foreboding. That's not just a foretelling of what is to come; it is a commentary on what **is**. It is an indictment on the human race and our responsibility for this current state of unrest. Violence committed by extremists bent on turning nation against nation, religion against religion. Factions around the world who kidnap, torture, force into sexual slavery and kill those who are powerless to stop them. Fatally ill young men whose massacres become synonymous with the places where they happened: Columbine, Aurora, Sandy Hook, Charleston, Virginia Tech.

These are troubling times. Violent times. Unpredictable times. Times of great sorrow. Times of crippling fear. What are we, as people of faith, to do when our most natural inclination is to hide from what we see in high definition on our screens every single day? Again, from Luke, following his predictions of fear and foreboding: “Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” During this season of hope and expectation, we actually celebrate two Advents: the birth of our Lord in Bethlehem and his return into our world to take it for himself. In this in-between time, however long it may be, we are called to live hope-filled lives, participating with Jesus in his plan to redeem the world.

Henri Nouwen, in his book, *Making All Things New,* writes “Jesus does not respond to our worry-filled way of living by saying that we should not be so busy with worldly affairs...nor does he suggest that we should withdraw from our involvements and live quiet, restful lives removed from the struggles of the world. Jesus' response to our worry-filled lives is quite different He asks us to shift the point of gravity, to relocate the center of our attention, to change our priorities. Jesus wants us to move from the 'many things' to the 'one necessary thing.'” Nouwen goes on to talk about a change of heart that makes everything different even while everything appears to remain the same. He says Jesus asks us to move our hearts to the center, where all other things fall into place. What is this center? Jesus calls it the kingdom of his Father, “Set your hearts on this kingdom first...and all these other things will be given you as well.”

“The days are surely coming,” the prophet Jeremiah predicted. The days are coming when God will fulfill the promises God made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. The days are coming when God will cause a righteous branch to spring up to execute justice and righteousness in all lands. Look, the tree has already sprouted leaves; the branch is growing among us. The Creator gardener God grafts us onto that branch and makes us part of the kingdom maturing in this world. Be awake, God tells us. Don't be weighed down by the worries of this life. Lift up your souls to God. Stand up, raise your heads, for your redemption draws near. Do not let the struggles of this world defeat you.

Scripture tells us to prepare a royal highway, to make straight the path of the Lord. Our construction blueprint comes right from the Bible's pages: rejoice, pray, give thanks, hold fast to what is good, so that the Lord may follow that path straight into our hearts. Then our hearts find their beat at the center of all life. We become peacemakers, in our homes and our communities, steadily speaking words of truth and peace while the world around us utters far different words. We become agents of reconciliation in the midst of broken relationships and broken promises. We become beacons of hope in the face of mass hopelessness. We bear the light of Christ into the dark places of the world. We pray knowing that our words reach their desination, confident that, when we pray, in the words of the book of Revelation, our prayers are offered with fire as a sacrifice to God and God's power is released into the world. We stand tall and raise our heads, not as misguided fools oblivious to the sin in our world, but as those who hold fast to Christ's promise to return, to clean up the colossal mess we have made of things and to welcome us into the eternal home he has made for us.

So, today, on this first day of Advent, let us turn off the TV and the computer screen, if only for a short time. Let us shift the point of gravity, move from the many things to the one necessary thing. Let us walk in the light of the Lord. Let us build up the highway, clear it of stones, remove any obstacles. As we journey to Bethlehem, listen for God's promises, witness God's faithfulness, believe in God's love born in us and among us. Let us prepare our hearts, for Christ is on his way.

Amen.

*Advent 1B*

*November 29, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 21:25-36*