In just two weeks, the season of Advent will begin and we will be preparing our hearts to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We'll get together on Wednesday nights for a meal and Holden Evening Prayer. We will decorate our Chrismon trees with beautiful symbols of the birth of Christ and his life. We'll put together Christmas bags so that families in our area can decorate *their* homes for the season. And when the time arrives to celebrate Jesus' birth, we'll sing Christmas hymns. Contrary to the secular practice of playing Christmas songs as soon as Halloween is over, we don't sing Christmas hymns until Christmas Eve. We sing hymns of anticipation during Advent so when Christmas arrives our music reflects our joy at the miracle of Christ's birth. “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” “Come and Worship, Come and Worship, Worship Christ, The Newborn King.” “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” “Joy to the World.” These hymns will mark a time of deep thanksgiving for what God has done for us in Christ.

This week, I learned something I didn't know about this last hymn. “Joy to the World” wasn’t originally composed for Christmas. It was part of hymn writer Isaac Watts’ attempt to translate the psalms and set them to music so they could be sung in worship. Watts’ inspiration for “Joy to the World” was Psalm 98, the psalm appointed for this day. Moreover, Watts wrote it to celebrate Christ’s *second* coming, rather than his first (which, by the way, is the purpose of many of our Advent hymns as well.) So *“Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king; let every heart prepare him room and heav'n and nature sing”* becomes a way for us to celebrate Christ's birth in Bethlehem *and* the day when he will come to judge the world with righteousness and the people with equity. And all from an Old Testament psalm. Pretty cool.

There is a distinct apocalyptic theme to today's scriptures. Psalm 98's prediction of God's judgment is bracketed by an Old Testament prediction from Malachi that a day is coming when all who do evil will be burned up. In our gospel lesson, Jesus is telling his followers that great destruction is on its way and they will not be able to stop it. “Nation will rise up against nation. There will be great earthquakes, famines and plagues. But before any of this happens, you will be arrested and persecuted and be put in prison.” Jesus is talking about an apocalyptic event that may be construed as the end of the earth, but he is also talking about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This was no ordinary temple. Its building was a huge undertaking which required a tremendous amount of labor and money. This new temple was said to be a larger and a more beautiful temple than the one that Solomon built. The historian Josephus wrote that much of the exterior of the temple was covered with gold that reflected the fiery rays of the sun. Moreover, he said that, from a distance, the temple appeared like a mountain covered with snow because of the beautiful white stone that covered it. It is in this place that the faithful worship and find strength for their ongoing struggle. It is a place where many come to give gifts to God. It is a place where people feel free to worship, safe from interference by the Roman government. However, it will be totally destroyed and wiped from the face of the earth. This is not the place where Jesus' followers will worship forever, for he despises the extravagance that the temple represents.

Jesus, as he often does, is talking in exaggeration to make a point. It is sort of like a parent reading a fairy tale to a child, a story that starts with: “Once upon a time...” The fantastical, adventurous story might not be in real life exactly as it is told in the book, but there is an underlying message of truth that can capture a child's imagination and even frighten her or him. This is the way Jesus tells the people at the temple in Jerusalem that bad things are coming. This is a dark and dire text, one that must have made the people dread every day ahead of them until that last day when their lives will be all but destroyed. But there is a delicious twist to this story. The book of Luke was written in the year 85 AD. The temple was indeed destroyed by the Romans, but it happened in the year 70 AD. So Luke's audience is hearing Jesus' proclamation of the temple's destruction 15 years after it happened! They have survived everything they had feared. They have suffered the pain of losing loved ones when the destruction of the temple spread to include all of Jerusalem. The people are weary, still grieving over those days, but they are alive. They are grateful to God for keeping God's promise to them but they must be wondering how God wants them to live their lives in the aftermath of that time.

At the time that Luke lived, apocalyptic passages were offered to help believers struggling from oppression and persecution to put their struggles into the larger context of the universal struggle between God and the forces of evil. In this way, such passages provided comfort that no matter how difficult things became, God would not abandon them and that God would ultimately prevail, thereby encouraging believers to persevere in the meantime and, indeed, to witness to their faith in times of persecution. So this passage from Luke would be heard as words of comfort and encouragement as they endured oppression and discrimination in the late first century. There are Christians in other parts of the world who face this same kind of oppression today, but we are not among them. For us, these words might be seen as both a history lesson and an opportunity to reach out to those who suffer for their faith.

So, in this second week of November in the second decade of the 21st century, what do these biblical texts mean for us? They tell us that Jesus will one day return to judge and redeem the world. Perhaps that time will be as violent as when the temple was destroyed in Jerusalem. But we are promised that not a hair on our heads will perish and our endurance will gain us our souls. There is no way to predict that day. We don't know if it will be in our lifetimes or in generations ahead. So, like the first-century Christians, we celebrate that we have today and we ask Jesus to help us discover the unique mission he has in store for us right now.

And so...the election. You had to know I would get to it eventually. One of our members told me about driving to Christiansburg before the election and seeing a church sign that read, “Jesus is coming, hopefully before the election.” That apocalyptic prediction did not come true. I am 60 years old and have voted for over 40 years. I do not remember any election being as contentious and exhausting as this one. Many of us wonder and worry about what comes next for our country, about whether we will like it or hate it in the months and years ahead. But listen. Whatever apocalypse you and I imagined for November 8, that day is over and we survived. Like the faithful in Jerusalem, we are now free to move ahead as a nation and as a church. The first thing we must do is admit and accept that we are a country divided. We must confess that we are all living in one country that is really different countries. The gap that separates us seems to grow wider every day. We can't wait for our government to fix it. Nor can we paralyze ourselves with fear about the future. As Ann Lamott writes, “We think we know what the future holds but we are tense and irritable people.”

Tense and irritable. That certainly describes much of this country in the months leading to our election day and these days after. Most of us are in the same boat, no matter who how we cast our ballots. We can let our little boat bob around aimlessly for the next four years or we can turn it in the direction Jesus would have us go. We can remember God's faithfulness to us and God's call to continue on as people of faith. What does that mean? It means we pray for peace – peace in our homes, in our communities, in our parish, in our country, in our world.

This election split a lot of families apart; it absolutely has happened in Billy's large family. So how about fostering some peace by agreeing not to talk politics at our upcoming Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner tables? Instead, how about sharing with one another the things that bind us together as family? How about doing the same thing here at church? We can remember God's covenantal relationship with the world, trusting that God has our backs, every single one of us. We can remind ourselves of our call as Christians: to share the love of Christ in our daily lives, to care for the vulnerable – the poor, people of color, women and children, the elderly. We can fight for justice for those we have forgotten in our selfish clamor to get what we can for ourselves. We can absorb all we can of Christ and reflect his light in our large gestures and in our small ones. We must do this to counteract the darkness. We can remember that for each person who sees the results of the election as a reason to celebrate, there is another dreading what might come.

Peace in our hearts and in our country will not come overnight. It will not be easy. All those ideas I mentioned of what we can do now will not achieve it, but they just might open our hearts to remember that God loves us all: old, young; gay, straight; black, white, and every shade of brown; women, men; poor, rich; entitled; or doomed before they are born.

This is what I know to do now – to immerse ourselves in the word of God and to believe all the promises God has made to love and protect us. We will remind myself about the fruits of the spirit that are our great gift: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” We will open ourselves to the words of Pope John XXIII: “The things that unite us are greater than those that divide us,” and we will read them over and over until we believe them. I may not say this often enough, but I will love each one of you with all the love in my heart and ask you to do the same for each other, for you and I are God's beloved, sent out into our dear country with an amazing message of peace and grace.

Amen.

*Pentecost 26* *November 13, 2106 Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish Luke 21:5-19*