



# Praying With One Eye Open

## Luke 21:25-36

### December 3, 2006

#### THE WORLD IS GOING TO HELL

Jim Somerville was enjoying a cup of coffee on the porch of a cottage on Seabrook Island in South Carolina. It was a heavenly late August morning, but the lady next to him started talking about hell. "This world is going to hell." Her words came out hard and flat like a judge's gavel coming down. This lady had grown up in the Depression. She had lived through World War II. She had lived through the turmoil of the sixties, the narcissism of the eighties, the materialism of the nineties. But through all those times she had never been as disgusted with the state of the world as she was now: civil war in Iraq, genocide in Darfur, fratricide in the Middle East, nukes in North Korea and maybe Iran, incompetents in Washington, not to mention hurricanes, tsunamis, and global warming. She asked Jim, "Honestly, what do you think is going to become of us?"

Now Jim Somerville is the Pastor of First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., so he tried to be pastorally reassuring. He tried to tell the woman that there were a lot of good people out there doing a lot of good things that didn't make the news. But the more the woman talked, the more Jim had to admit that there really are plenty of reasons to believe that the world is going to hell.

The gospel writer Luke was wondering the same thing when he wrote the words we've heard today. The world seemed to be coming apart. Jews were in shock that the Temple and the whole city of Jerusalem had been burned to the ground and plowed over by the Romans. The Jewish world had been turned upside down. The Roman world was not much better. The latter third of the first century was full of turmoil in the Empire. During one two-year period there had been four Caesars. The end of the century was ruled by a Caesar name Domitian who made Nero seem tame.

Luke and his fellow believers were convinced that they were living in a period in between God's punishment of Jerusalem by the Gentiles, and God's punishment of the nations that would surely come. It truly seemed like the whole world was going to hell.

#### PRAY THAT YOU HAVE STRENGTH

What to do? You get on our knees and pray. Luke wrote how Jesus said to pray when the world is falling apart "that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place... (Luke 21:36) Pray that you will have the strength to escape the errors of false prophets. Pray that you will have strength to escape the persecutions upon

Christians. Pray that you will escape the cataclysm that will surely come. Luke was convinced that the only way to escape the terrifying events of this crazy world was constant prayer.

That's a good word for you and me. When we get up in the morning, we pray for the grace and strength to get through all the craziness in our lives. When we watch the news in the evening, we pray that God will step in and intervene in the craziness in our world. Like the early Christians who prayed in Aramaic, *marana tha*, we pray, "O Lord, come quickly." O Lord, don't delay. Please step in and bring some sanity to this world that is self-destructing. That is our prayer, and that was Luke's prayer too.

## PRAY WITH HOPE

And Luke prayed with hope. He based his hope on the promise of Jesus that some day, the Son of Man will come with power and great glory. And when he comes, we can stand up and look up, because our liberation is drawing near. (Luke 21:27-28) Yes, it feels like the world is coming unglued. But One is coming who will put the world back together again, One is coming to bring justice, One is coming to save the world from all the hell on this earth and all the hell beyond it. And when that Son of man comes, it will be bad news for many, but it will be good news for those who have been waiting for God's rule.

We call this hope the Second Coming. All across the world today, believers are focusing on the Second Coming on this first Sunday of Advent. It seems like a strange way to get ready for Christmas, but think about it this way: if God in Christ broke into our crazy world one time, then God can do it again. If we take the first coming of Christ seriously, then we can look forward to the second coming of Christ. And if we look forward to the second coming of Christ, then we can pray with hope.

If there were no such hope, what would be left to do? Verse 34 describes the depressing alternative:

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life...

When people give up hope in God and this world, what happens is that they become drunk, but not necessarily on booze. When people give up hope in God, they get drunk on despair. When people give up hope, they may get drunk with the drive to gather as many things in life as possible. (Our nation is in a constant hangover from being so materially rich.) Whether we are drunk on booze or drunk with despair or drunk on things, the result is the same. We get so distracted and anxious about so many things that we fail to focus on the important things. While the world goes to hell, we distract ourselves with one addiction or another.

## WAKE UP CALL

But if Christ is coming again, as Jesus promised, then we need to wake up from our distracted stupor. The hope of the Second Coming is a wake-up call.

A lady named Lillian Daniel was staying in a hotel for a night. Before she went to sleep, she called the front desk and asked for a wake-up call for the morning. The manager said ‘yes of course we will give you a wake up call. And when,’ he asked, “would you like your second wake up call?” Lillian said, “No need for that. One will be enough.”

The morning came, and right on time, the manager made his wake up call. When Lillian answered, he said he would be calling back in fifteen minutes. Lillian said “That’s not necessary, I’m awake now.” The manager asked: “Are you sure? A lot of people fall back asleep.” Lillian said, “You can hear me: I’m awake.” Manager: “Yes, but some people talk to me in their sleep. Are you sure you don’t want another call?”

Part of Jesus’ struggle with his disciples was keeping them awake. He always had to warn them to stay spiritually alert. He had to warn them to stay alert in the face of hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). He had to warn them to be alert in the face of temptation. (Luke 17:3) He tried to keep them awake on the night he was betrayed in Gethsemane. (Luke 22:46) For Jesus, a good disciple was alert and awake.

The hope of the Second Coming is God’s way of making sure we are awake. God is not limited to one or two wake up calls. God is calling on us constantly, telling us to stay alert, be ready, keep up our hope. For someday, when we least expect it, the Messiah will come and save this hellish world. The Christ will complete the work of salvation that began through the cross and the empty tomb.

So when things seem to be at their worst, when it looks like the world is going to hell, don’t cower in the shadows, don’t resign yourself to despair, don’t medicate yourself with whatever distractions you can find. Jesus says stand up, and raise your heads, because your liberation is drawing near. Jesus promises us the world will not go to hell. Jesus promises us God’s love will not let it go. God has stepped in before, and God will step in again, to complete the salvation that God started in Christ.

IN THE MEANTIME, we pray, but with one eye open. Because our world is teetering on the edge of chaos, we pray. But because our Lord is liable to return any moment, we keep one eye open. As the Savior told us:

...watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man. (Luke 21:36)

Someday we will all stand before the Son, and celebrate his return. In the meantime during this Christmas season, we celebrate his first coming. It’s good practice, don’t you know, so we’ll know how to celebrate his second coming. -- Douglas E. Murray