

***“The Days Are Coming”***

My good friend and brother, Pastor Mark Luecke, recently retired as Chaplain at Timken Mercy Hospital in Canton, wrote to me. In addition to sending me a couple of cartoons, clippings, and a word or two about some mutual friends, he wrote to chide me for my front article in the November newsletter. He applauded how I addressed the issue of Christ the King; but then he said that I had left out something very important: *“Our King is coming again as judge. This does not frighten us. But we do need to keep hearing it.”* My first reaction was, *“Who do you think you are critiquing my newsletter? Write your own newsletter article.”* But my second, more considered, response was, *“He’s right.”*

Today’s lessons are sobering reminders of how right Pastor Luecke is. ***“The days are coming,”*** Jeremiah alerts us. ***“May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”*** St. Paul intones. ***“There will be signs,”*** Jesus tells us, signs that will alert us how close those days are.

When there is a change in the weather, we can smell it. When someone has something they are going to use to surprise us, we sense something is going on. When someone is very sick and failing, we will say, after they have died, *“I could feel they were failing. I felt death was near.”* We can read the signs; or at least see them after the event happened. We will slap ourselves on the forehead and groan, *“Oh, oh, I knew it! I just knew this was going to happen! Why didn’t I get ready for it?”*

Around here the signs that Christmas is coming will become pretty obvious. Decorations on the street lights and village green appear. TV commercials already picture Santa Claus and presents. The mail is full of catalogs. Your Sunday newspaper is stuffed like the turkey you had at Thanksgiving and merchants are once again gearing up for the time of year that brings in the majority of their annual profits. There is also simply the fact that the calendar is going from November to December,

and December's days going from the first to the eighteenth and too soon to the twenty-fifth.

Some parts of the world expect snow, even saying that it won't feel like Christmas without snow. Other parts of the world never think of snow with Christmas; for them, Christmas is the beginning of summer. Christmas could be fireworks and picnics. All the different ways Christmas looks also have their own signs that Christmas is coming.

The first Christmas had the sign of an old woman, Elizabeth, getting pregnant. That was followed by a second sign—her husband, Zechariah, who suddenly was made mute, unable to talk. The third sign of Christmas was a virgin named Mary who became pregnant without sex. The fourth sign was a dream to her fiancé, Joseph, telling him that Mary's pregnancy was indeed miraculous, not scandalous. When she gives birth in a stable to her first-born son: as the shepherds were told ***“This shall be a sign to you — you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.”***

All those signs were there for the first participants to realize that God was at work. They needed the signs as guideposts along the journey, reassuring them that the direction they traveled was indeed the way God wanted them to go.

But why do we need to be alert for Christmas? Why be alert for the birth of Mary's son? Why, to be practically-minded about this, why get ready for an event of the past when the future is still coming with its last day? What about the signs in the sun and moon and stars? What about the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory?

Should we not get ready for them? After all, this last day is the coming of God. This last day is the day of judgment, of us being judged, as Pastor Luecke reminded me. How do we get ready for such a judgment? How do we get ready for God looking over our lives, the whole of our lives, and judging us? Not just judging for good deeds and judging us for the wrong we've done, but weighing us for the totality of our life.

God will not just count the good deeds and subtract the bad ones and, hopefully, there will still be good deeds left to call us good. How can we be judged good if we have done evil? ***“If You, O Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand?”*** (Psalm 130:3). And if we have done wrong, how could our good deeds possibly make up for the bad?

Such a judgment is worrisome. Such a judgment does make us afraid of what God will do to us and afraid of God. How do we get ready for such a judgment?

We get ready for Christmas because Christmas is our redemption drawing near to us. Christmas, the birth of Jesus, is not judgment, it is our redemption. Jesus is born to redeem us, to buy us back, to free us from the measuring of our lives. As we sing in the Song of Praise: *“Power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and blessing and glory are his.”*

Jesus comes, not to measure or judge, but to forgive the wrongdoers, to forgive those who have done evil, to forgive those who do not love God and fear God more than all other things.

Jesus is doing a new thing with us. Instead of judging, he has mercy. Instead of condemning, he has mercy. Instead of accusing us he marks us with his love.

Indeed, Jesus comes to be judged. Jesus comes to be condemned in our place. Jesus comes to die for us, in our place, taking that judgment that is coming and making it happen ahead of schedule. He suffers all of God’s judgment and then God, out of love for us and for Jesus, raised up Jesus to life. God thereby lifted up Jesus above judgment. God has put mercy over measuring, forgiveness over condemnation.

Look at the signs of this coming. Jesus tells us ***“Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”*** Look at the leaves . . . Look at the leaves of mercy, seen in all the times we

receive the Lord's Supper, the meal of mercy for us. Look at the leaves of forgiveness, sprouting here amongst us each Sunday, sprouting here amongst us in our own words of forgiveness to one another. Look at the leaves of service, of time given to help one another. Look at the leaves of prayer offered up for so many people. Look at the leaves of advocacy, as we work to change systems and orders, and not merely respond to circumstance

Look at the leaves because it is too easy to get discouraged that judgment and evil and wars and rumors of wars are always present. We can be weighed down by family burdens, family secrets, family arguments and anger, or a disregard of others. We can get caught up in running around in trying to be busy and making our lives worth something. We can despair of things going right and so try drinking or drugs or being a couch potato.

When we are burdened, wearied, worn and frustrated — look at the signs of the end that is our redemption. When we feel that things are dark, look at the signs of the stars and suns that show us the new light of Christ coming. When we feel judged and condemned, at fault for the accident, for a death, for a crippling, look at the leaves sprouting.

Look at the mercy springing forth in Christ. Look at Christ's love. Look at the resurrection! Those are the signs of hope in the midst of distress and confusion. Those signs will always be with us. Lift up your heads with hope!

See, the days are coming . . . ***“In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: [Yahweh Zedqinoo] ‘The LORD Our Righteousness.’”***

Amen.