

“Drug overdoses and suicides caused drop in 2017 life expectancy.” “Christian missionary murdered in India.” “Camp Fire is deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California history.” “12 dead in Thousand Oaks shooting.” “7.0 magnitude earthquake rocks Alaska.” When you hear another day’s headlines that sound like this-- natural disasters, war, division, persecution, and unraveling morality that turn our world upside down-- does your heart rise with hopefulness? Or plummet in hopelessness?

Recently, I’ve heard grandparents express their fear about their grandchildren’s future, and young couples question why anyone would want to bring children into this world. It seems like the last thing most people hold for today and for the future is... hope.

And yet, there it is--in big letters on the screen—HOPE. Today, as we begin the season of Advent--which means “coming”--we’ll focus on how Jesus comes bearing gifts, including the gift of... hope.

But what hope can Jesus bring to a world that feels so hopeless? True, all the wars, natural disasters, and persecution can leave us feeling hopeless, but we can’t say they’re unexpected. Because they’re exactly what Jesus said would happen.

In the verses preceding our sermon text, Jesus warned his disciples that they would experience things like false teachers and prophets; wars, revolution, and rumors of war; natural disasters; persecution and martyrdom of Christians; people turning away from the faith; an increase of wickedness; the love of many growing cold. Sounds pretty familiar, doesn’t it?

That’s because Jesus is describing what are called “signs of the End Time,” things Jesus said would happen in the time between his two comings—his first coming at Christmas and his coming again at Judgment Day. Right now, we’re living in the end times. That’s why seeing Jesus’ words fulfilled around us isn’t surprising.

And in that, we can find hope. Not because troubling hardships always miss believers. No, these “signs” affect Christians just as much as unbelievers, sometimes even more. But these “signs” give us hope, because they remind us of something vitally important. This sinful, fallen world isn’t the reality we’ll live with forever. God has the perfect solution to take care of all this world’s troubles.

Jesus uses a parable to remind us. He said, ***“Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. When you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”***

Midwesterners get this picture, right? We’ve spent enough time looking out windows at trees with barren, bleak limbs to understand the joy that comes when branches start sprouting little green buds. Those little green sprouts fill us with joy, because they signal that the warmth, light, new life, and beauty of summer will arrive soon. They signal that good things are coming.

So do the signs of the end times we see in the world. Although natural disasters, wars, and persecution leave us feeling disheartened, they also can give us hope. As backward as that sounds, these signs remind us that good things, better things, are coming—Jesus is coming back.

Worldly wisdom claims, “If we can just _____, then we’ll change the world!” But we can’t even agree! Will strict gun regulations solve violence? Or will arming everyone? Will political correctness remove divisions among people? Or do we need greater protection for free speech? Will stronger environmental protection save the world? Or voting the right leaders into office? Or letting each person determine morality for themselves?

Day after day, optimistic and hopeful steps are taken to save the world. But day after day, the headlines remain the same. Day after day, hearts hurt, and hopes hit the ground. Earthly hopes remain nothing more than the dictionary definition of “hope” –“A feeling and desire for a certain thing to happen.” A strong feeling; an ardent desire; but that doesn’t make them certain. So is it all hopeless? Not at all. Because although we can’t save the world, Jesus has come, and is coming again, to give us the gift of hope—hope that lets you stand.

In our text, Jesus describes some of the signs people will experience on earth when he returns as judge at Judgment Day. ***“There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror...the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”***

Sounds more terrifying than hopeful, doesn’t it? For the unbeliever who realizes too late that they rejected the one true God, spurning all the times he lovingly reached out to them through his Word, and ignoring the signs of his imminent return, yes. Judgment Day will fill them with overwhelming terror and regret when they see ***“The Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”***

But for the believer, it will be the most perfect joy they’ve ever experienced! That’s why Jesus encourages, ***“When these things take place, stand up and lift up your heads.”*** Notice the different directions. Unbelievers drop down, fainting from terror or vainly trying to cover their heads. But the believer stands up, head held high with joy and confidence, because they know that their ***“redemption is drawing near.”*** The day when the Savior we’ve put our faith in returns to bring the redemption won for the world through Bethlehem’s manger, Calvary’s cross, and the empty tomb, to its full realization. The day when war, natural disasters, suffering, and persecution will cease forever, because Christ has cleansed the world of sin and all its painful consequences, and restored the universe to the perfection in which God created it.

Yes, we rightly mourn when hurricanes, hand grenades, and hatred kill and destroy, but even in those struggles, we can stand and lift up our heads. Because each sign reminds us that our Savior is coming again! Because Christ has given us the hope that lets us stand. And so we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus. Quickly come!”

But how quickly will Jesus come back? Can we really be sure that he’ll return “soon”? I mean, the signs of the end times aren’t just recent occurrences. When Jesus spoke these words, many were already visible. There’s never been a year in history devoid of conflicts and natural disasters. It’s been 2 millennia. Should we really act like Jesus’ return is imminent?

Truthfully, we have no idea. Judgment Day could come in 5 years, 5 centuries, or 5 seconds. But that unknown time doesn’t give us an excuse to become lax. It means we should be that much more prepared! There’s a reason fortified cities always had watchmen standing guard on their walls. Because they never knew when their enemy might attack, they always needed to be prepared!

And because we have no idea when Jesus might return, but the signs still persist, Jesus encourages us always be prepared, too! He says, ***“Be careful. “Be always on the watch.” “And pray.”***

We need those encouragements from God, don’t we? Because Satan’s very good at getting us to grow careless and lazy in our watchfulness. Let’s face it. How often over the last week did you wake up thinking, “This could be the day Jesus comes back!”? How easily we get so caught up in life this world that we give no thought to life in the next!

Note the different ways Jesus says people fall down while standing watch for his return. He says, ***“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life.”*** Drunks don’t

make very good watchmen, obviously. And dissipation is really any kind of over-indulgence. Over-indulging in school, work, relationships, family, fun, food—in literally ANYTHING— can leave us unprepared for Jesus' return, passed out on the ground without an eye towards the sky.

But we can also become weighed down by the anxieties of life. If fear and terror about our earthly lives brings us to our knees, certain that there's escaping the evil of the world and our own hearts, our eyes point down towards the ground, not to the sky where our help will come from. And when we grow careless in our watchfulness, we're susceptible to losing our faith, susceptible to that day **"closing on us unexpectedly like a trap."**

So how can we possibly hope to be prepared, when Jesus could return at literally any moment? By trusting completely in that which will never pass away. As Jesus comforts and encourages, **"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."** Don't over-indulge or over-fear things that are destined for destruction. Instead, trust in God's never ceasing, never failing Word!

When Jesus returns as Judge, he'll look for faith. So, when you're firmly standing in your faith that Jesus is your Savior, by consistently hearing and studying God's powerful Word, you can have absolute certainty that you're prepared for Jesus' coming, whenever it might be.

That's the hope that lets us **"stand before the Son of Man."** How can we sinners stand in the holy presence of the Son of Man? Because God's Word will never pass away. God's promises will never fail.

We can be confident that Jesus will return and cleanse this world from sin and its painful consequences. We can be confident that Jesus will return and welcome us into eternal life in Heaven... because God keeps his promises.

That's one way Jesus' first coming shapes the way we view his second coming. We have certain hope because God kept his first promise to Adam and Eve when he sent his Son into the world, born of a woman in Bethlehem's manger. Certain hope because God kept the promise he extended through Jeremiah, **"At that time, I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land."**

That's why hope in Christ is always a certain promise. Because it's on God's promises, which never pass away. Because Christ has come, and Christ will come again. No matter how bad the world gets, how bad your sins have been, or how often you've fallen in standing watch. Because just as he promised, God sent his Son, our Savior. And just as he promised—**"He will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness."**

Our righteousness. Yours and mine. Our certain hope that lets us stand, in this life and the next. He is coming. **"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope."** May we live each day with this joyful hope filling your heart— "Today could be the day when my Savior returns!" Come, Lord Jesus. Quickly come.