Sunday, November 27, 1994
**BE ALERT! WATCH!**
Luke 21:25-36

This passage from Luke's gospel is one of the most difficult to interpret and understand in all of the New Testament. It's called the "apocalyptic discourse of Jesus." Here's a little background on this kind of writing and speaking.

The word "apocalyptic" comes from "apocalypse," which means "revelation," as in the name of the last book in the New Testament, the Revelation to John. There are also apocalyptic writings in other parts of the Bible, for example in Isaiah 24-27. The book of Daniel is the best Old Testament representative of this kind of literature.

As a kind of literature, apocalyptic writing deals with a revelation, or series of revelations, usually by means of an angel, which reveals the supernatural world beyond the world of historical day-to-day events. The focus is on eschatology — the end of the world as we know it and the beginning of a new world.

Usually, the transition is described in terms of transformations and changes that are cosmic in scope but are not at first visible to the majority of people.

Apocalyptic writing always appears in history during major historical crises, or as centuries or millennia come to an end. In our time, for example, as we approach the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, there is already a lot of talk about the end of history as we know it. Since the coming of Jesus into our world, New Testament apocalyptic writing usually includes some kind of disclosure concerning a "second coming" of Jesus.

The important question for us today is, what do such passages as this one from Luke's gospel have to tell us in this season of Advent as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth? What is God saying to us through this kind of writing? What does it have to do with our living here and now?

First, we need to remember that the first Christians confidently expected the return of Jesus and the end of the world to occur very soon. There is some evidence that the Apostle Paul expected this to happen before the end of his life.

Secondly, in order to understand Bible passages like the one read earlier, we need to remember that they are written in the language and with the worldview of that time. God is thought of as dwelling in a heaven above, the world is flat, and the Savior is pictured as returning on the clouds of heaven with power and glory.

The fact that the writers of the Bible expressed themselves in the language of the worldview of their time is natural, and it does not do away with the inner truth of what they are saying. We have to go beyond that old worldview to discover the inner truth.

The first part of this inner truth is this: the world as we know it is always coming to an end. Nothing in this world is permanent except God. This is terrifying to many people. We like things to stay the way they are because we have a lot of time and energy invested in things as they are.

Earlier in this chapter from Luke's gospel, some people around Jesus had been admiring the Temple in Jerusalem and saying, "This is the gate of heaven itself. Nothing has ever been so marvelous; it will last forever."

However, Jesus reminded them that although the temple was an important symbol and gathering place in their religious life, it was not permanent. He went on to say that one day, in the not-too-distant future, the temple would be destroyed, but this would not mean that God's power had come to an end or that God no longer cared for them or for the creation.

Jesus was saying to the people then and to us today, "Do not put your faith in the wrong things, the things that will pass away."

The inner truth of the passage is also this: the earth may not come to an end in one climactic moment, but in a deeper sense, the world we see around us is always coming to an end. Scientists tell us that 99% of all the species that have lived on earth have died away.

Yet much of our energy is spent on pursuing things that do not last, and in that sense, our little worlds are always coming to an end.

So when the Bible speaks of the distress of nations and people fainting with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world, it is expressing our present anxiety as we allow ourselves to admit the transience of much we have put so much trust in — our plans, our dreams, our pet ideas.

Is there anything in life that does not change and go away? Separation, distance, loss of friends and family, loss of cherished hopes and dreams, loss of all the little things that give meaning to our lives — these losses are little deaths that come to us each day, little worlds that come to an end. Death does not wait till the end of our lives to meet us and to make an end. Instead, we all experience hundreds of little deaths and big ones before we die.

Every day I see people full of fear that things will change — people afraid of the future and of what it might bring. This passage is one of great comfort. It says, "Do not worry, God is in charge."

A second part of the inner truth contained in this passage is that God is always entering our world when we least expect it and in ways we do not always anticipate or recognize. Indeed, this is the eternal message of the Christmas event itself — God in a baby in a manger — not what the world expected. God continues to enter our world and our lives today in quiet, unobtrusive ways. Furthermore, God's continual coming into the world is not the end, but rather always a new beginning. That's the emphasis. New beginnings are not possible without endings, but the emphasis is on the new beginning. In fact, God's power can be experienced in endings and new beginnings.

This means that in the midst of all the loss and the world as we know it coming to an end, there is hope and good news. Many times, it is only when our own personal world is coming apart that we are ready and open to see what is eternal and to experience God's grace. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

A third part of the inner truth of this passage is especially important for us to hear as we enter this Advent and Christmas season. Listen to these words again: "Watch, be alert, be on guard

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

We can so easily become overburdened with the cares of this life, especially when we set our hopes too much on the perishing goods of the present. It is then that we make ourselves vulnerable to their inevitable passing away.

In a more specific sense, we can so easily become overburdened with the activities of the Advent and Christmas season that we miss God's spirit, which is ever entering our world anew.

Be alert! Watch! Put your faith and trust in that which is eternal — God. Once, when someone asked me, "When is Christ coming again?" I replied, "I didn't know he had left."

Above all, remember this: our little worlds are always coming to an end. However, it remains for us to be alert and open so that God's continual coming and the many endings we all experience will not make life a terror, but an overwhelming joy. Amen.