Sermon Title: "Redemption Draws Near"
Text: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
Preached At: Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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Last Sunday we focused on endings—we remembered those close to us who have passed on, and we marked the end of the Christian year with a reminder of the kingship of Christ and the hope of resurrection.

Today, our focus turns to beginnings. Advent is upon us—the season when we move into expectant waiting for Christ to come to us anew.

As we've already heard, our Advent theme this year is "Floods of Mercy." Perhaps after listening to our passage from Luke, you are a bit puzzled. Maybe "Floods of *Judgment*" would seem a more appropriate title to you?

This is a harsh and confusing passage from Luke!

We'll try to make some sense of it this morning.

But before we get to that, I want to talk just a bit about another prominent theme of the Advent season—at least in our culture.

Movies!

Every December, an impressive lineup of expensive blockbusters is rolled out for our holiday entertainment, and this year is no different. From James Bond to Abraham Lincoln to an adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's famous *Anna Karenina* to *Les Miserables*, there is no shortage of impressive fare to choose from this December.

(As an aside, I think that our cultural fascination with movies has a lot to say about our innate human need to be part of big stories of hope and about good conquering evil, but that's probably another sermon ☺.)

At any rate, one of the big movies in theatres right now is *Life of Pi*, a film about an Indian boy who, after a shipwreck en route to American, finds himself stranded on a little boat with a Bengal tiger.

(The film is based on Canadian author Yann Martel's book by the same name.)

It's a wonderful story and a visually stunning film. I'm not going to talk much about the story itself because I don't want to spoil it. But I do want to refer to one specific theme from the beginning of the film.

The main character, Pi Patel is a young man of deep religious curiosity. He is born into a Hindu culture, but gradually comes to learn more about Buddhism and Islam and Christianity. Each new religion is incorporated into young Pi's view about the world, which has room for many gods. Jesus takes his place among the many thousands of Hindu gods.

Pi's father, an atheist, has little use for Pi's religious syncretism. "To believe in everything is to believe in nothing!" he says.

Pi is not dissuaded. He persists in his attempts to embrace God in whatever form he is presented.

Of course, Pi Patel's approach is looked upon very favourably in our culture with its smorgasbord approach to God and religion.

In a nation as ethnically and religiously diverse as Canada, many people have adopted a kind of pick and choose approach to religion. A little bit of this, a little bit of that, we take the bits we like and reject the ones we don't as we construct our unique, personalized religious identities.

(Reginald Bibby, a sociologist from the University of Lethbridge, has written extensively about this, calling this approach "religion a la carte.")

In this approach to faith, God, religion, *the individual* is sovereign. *We* decide what we like and what we don't like about this or that understanding of God. *We* decide what appeals to us, what makes sense, what is helpful or inspiring or whatever. But the important thing is that *we* are in charge.

It is interesting to think about this approach to God here, at the outset of Advent, in light of Jeremiah's words of hope to beleaguered exiles and Jesus' words of warning to Jerusalem.

Advent is all about the God who *comes*—on God's own terms.

It is about God who comes to us in unsettling ways, who confronts us, who does not necessarily conform to our expectations or preferences.

At Advent, we are reminded once again that God is in charge, not us.

So. *How* does God come to us?

We are familiar with one kind of coming—the kind we typically associate with Advent:

- Emmanuel—God with us

- The events of Christmas that we are waiting for in Advent are about God incarnating (*in-carne…* in the flesh)—Christ entering the human condition in order to redeem it
- **This is God identifying with the human condition, coming to be with us, to walk in our shoes, to understand us, show us how to live**

But there is another kind of coming as well—and Luke reminds us of it in our text this morning:

- The Son of Man coming on the clouds
- This vision of cosmic upheaval
- Words like "anguish," "fear," "terror," "perplexity," "destruction," "woe," "power," and glory"
- **This is God transforming the way things are, judging what is sinful and false and revealing what is good and true**

Two texts symbolizing two different kinds of comings. Jeremiah speaks of God coming in righteousness and justice to establish peace and safety for Jerusalem and the people of God.

In Luke, Jesus speaks about the coming destruction of Jerusalem—a time of chaos and confusion and fear, and God coming as *judge*.

Can we make sense of these two comings here, at the outset of Advent? I think we can, and we must because these are both part of the gospel story. These are both important parts of what it looks like when God comes to us.

We don't have much trouble with the first, so I'll focus more on the second.

Last week Kerby talked about apocalypse as a kind of peeking behind the veil of the cosmos.

This isn't a form of speaking or writing that we are familiar—or comfortable—with in the twenty first century!

But apocalyptic literature was a well-known tool, often of those in powerless positions, which used highly symbolic language and metaphors to talk about the meaning and theological significance of earthly events.

So when Jesus talks about the "signs in the sun, moon, and stars," and "the roaring and tossing of the sea," (which is a symbol throughout Scripture of chaos, disorder, and conflict), and about the Son of Man coming on the clouds (a figurative expression going all the way back to Daniel 7 to refer to a unique figure taking his place at the right hand of the God of the Universe, that "Ancient of Days), this is probably a metaphorical way

of saying that coming events in Jerusalem, and his "enthronement" as king will have cosmic effects that will reverberate throughout the world.

Which it has. Jerusalem's rejection of Jesus did, in a variety of direct and indirect ways, eventually, lead to the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem, the symbolic places where God's presence dwelt.

The temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. (in "this generation," as Jesus says in 21:32), only a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, when Rome crushed a Jewish uprising.

And the effects of Jesus' coming as Israel's unexpected and unwelcome king have reverberated down through history, around the world.

The problem is, modern readers often read strange texts like today's passage from Luke in very wooden and literalistic ways, which leads to all kinds of trouble.

Many people throughout history have read our text today as a prediction of Jesus's second coming or the "end of the world."

The text is not about the end of the world but about the vindication of Jesus as God's agent of redemption, and about the consequences of God's people rejecting the one who would bring them peace.

So what? What does this God who comes in unpredictable and unsettling ways mean for us, today?

I think they key is found in 21:36. "Be always on the watch."

Not for the end of the world, necessarily, but for the God who comes in ways that we may not expect or prefer.

Of course, we do believe that Jesus will come again, and he still comes to meet us in our everyday lives. But if there's one thing the long story of the Bible makes clear is that sometimes even those who think they know God best, who should be the most in tune with his plans, can miss him.

So how are we to be watchful?

I think that one of the messages that texts like this one are meant to communicate is that as followers of Jesus we are to be people who have **bifocal vision**.

Those of you who wear bifocals will have a good idea of what I might be talking about. Bifocals have two lenses—one for distant vision, one for near vision.

I think this is good metaphor for how we are to be watchful—during Advent and throughout the year. Most of us find the near vision to come fairly naturally.

We don't often have problems seeing what's right in front of us. We have our families, and our jobs, and our kids, and our hobbies, and good causes to devote time to, church activities to be involved in…

We do the best we can to live through the ordinary joys and sorrows that come into each of our lives. We praise God for the good things, pray for strength and peace for the hard things; we lift up for the needs of others.

We live our lives, and we believe God is there with us helping and encouraging (sometimes correcting and judging) us along the way. That's the "near vision" component.

What about the distant vision?

It's keeping the big picture in mind and looking for the ways in which the big picture breaks into and transforms the smaller pictures of our lives. It's not letting the stuff in the "near vision" overwhelm the fundamental reality of who Jesus is, what he has done, what he is doing in and through us, and what he will do.

Anybody who has been a parent or who has tried to learn a new skill, knows this. Whether it is hockey or soccer practice or learning piano or art classes or whatever, it is easy to look at the near vision and get frustrated.

For kids, the music scales are hard work. The skating and shooting drills are tedious. The initial paint strokes are far from da Vinci, and the first songs don't sound much like Mozart!

But as parents who observe from afar and over time, we see beauty and skill and creativity taking shape. We see that there is hope on the horizon!

The same thing is true of your life and my life. We may see nothing but the same old struggles and the same old obligations. We may think that our lives aren't very significant in the grand scheme of things. We may feel like we're spinning our wheels or that the good we do doesn't make much of a difference.

BUT… The big picture is that we are all part of a grand story that God is telling, where his creation is being reclaimed and redeemed, and where we are becoming more like him.

And there is no better season than Advent to be reminded of the big picture that all of our lives are working towards.

There is one thing about both Jeremiah 33 and Luke 21 that is absolutely clear: God has come and is coming to set things right!

Advent is the beginning of the great reversal when things begin to turn around—when we celebrate our conviction that our redemption has drawn near, even if not in the ways we might expect.

It may not always look like things are turning around. There are many times in our own lives or in the world around us where this doesn't seem to be the case. We need only open a newspaper to see that our world is still in turmoil.

But we need to keep our bifocals on.

When we take a longer view, we see that the big picture is of a God who comes to identify with his people to enter the human condition, to meet us with grace and compassion but also rule and to judge and who calls his people to live faithfully even when the world around is in chaos and convulsion and crisis.

We need this God who comes, both as Emmanuel, the Righteous Branch from David's line, who ushers in peace and safety *and* as the Son of Man on the clouds, the Lord of history whose kingdom is not welcomed by everyone.

This God is a God like no other.

This God *comes to us*, into the muck and the mire of earthly existence, into the pain and confusion of human experience, into the story which he authored and which he will lead to its completion… and gives himself away for the sake of the world, absorbing evil and injustice to purchase our peace.

I think this is beautifully reflected by a song that I encountered a few weeks ago. Many of you are familiar with the music of Steve Bell. There is a song called "Descent" on his new album *Keening for the Dawn*.

The lyrics are written by English poet Malcolm Guite (he actually recites a few lines in the song itself), and they contrast the God who comes to us during Advent with other "more impressive gods."

I want to read you the last few lines of the song:

> They towered above our mortal plain
> Dismissed this restless flesh with scorn,
> Aloof from birth and death and pain
> But you were born

Born to these burdens, borne by all
Born with us all ‘astride the grave’
Weak, to be with us when we fall
And strong to save

Weak to be with us when we fall, and strong to save.

How we need this God who comes in this way. In weakness to identify with we who are so familiar with falling, yet in strength to offer salvation.

Amen.