

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**  
**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**  
**Church Year C**  
**Date: 11/29/15**  
**Season: Advent 1**  
**Luke 21:25-36**

Ever heard the old saying, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.”? Well, do you know where you’re going? I mean, seriously? I spent an entire week recently thinking about that question, the question, “Where am I going?”

I was blessed to be on a retreat sponsored by the Church Pension Fund at the Bishop’s Ranch in Sonoma County, CA. It’s a place of beauty and serenity and peace and prayer. Every day I would hike the trails through the hills, fields, and vineyards of the Ranch and try to be attentive to whatever presented itself along the path, whether it was a magnificent vista, a fallen limb, a hummingbird, or a sun-dappled opening in the forest. Hints and glimpses of God’s presence, God the Mighty Creator of all the beauty of this world, were always before me if I just slowed down to look and **see**. About 900 years ago, St. Thomas Aquinas said that nature is God’s first Bible. It’s so true.

Now all this time hiking around the Ranch didn’t have a particular goal or destination. It was the walking that was important and **seeing** what was there to be seen.

But, paradoxically, in the midst of all that walking to nowhere, I did come to some conclusions about where I’m going. Now, I love my work, I love St. Thomas and the people at St. Thomas, and I love living right here in the magnificence of the Puget Sound area. This is my home and I’m as grateful as I can be for that. I’m planted here. But I also know that I’ll be 64 in a couple weeks and I want to believe that means I have only lived two thirds of the span of years allotted to me. I want to believe I will have the last third yet to go.

So I really got some clarity about where I’m headed in that last third, and what that might look like, a clarity I didn’t really have until last week. I won’t bore you with details, because I really don’t know any. I just know I have some vision about the shape of the years to come.

I was also with 30 other clergy from across the country on this retreat and I was so interested to hear their stories about what’s happening in their communities. While some are struggling, there are also many places where the Church is strong and vital and growing. The Holy Spirit is moving in the Church, that’s for sure. But I’ll tell you this. As many great stories as I heard about, lots of great places, there’s no place I would rather be than right here with you. This is such a faithful, committed, open-hearted

community, a place filled with life and the Spirit, a place where Christ's love is known and is being made known. So a big piece of the last third of my life involves ministry right here with you all in this place.

And so that brings us around to today, the First Sunday in Advent. Advent is a time to get clear about the road ahead of us, a time to pay attention to the markers and signposts along the road, a time to really **see** what is right in front of us. And in this morning's gospel reading we are invited to pay attention to markers and signposts that are pretty vivid. We drop in as Jesus is telling his disciples about the destruction of the Temple, the center of religious and national life for the Jewish people. And all this takes place right before his arrest and crucifixion. So it really is an apocalyptic time, a time of great and cataclysmic change. And Jesus is telling his disciples, and he's telling us, how to live in the midst of such violent and cataclysmic change. Don't get distracted by too much pleasure and don't get distracted by too much worry. Don't fall into despair and don't fall into frivolous irresponsibility. Wait and watch confidently for the Lord's return, whenever it might be.

And so the question that Jesus poses is, "How will we live in the meantime?" How will we live as we await the Lord's return in the midst of cataclysmic changes? How will we live in the midst of what looks like times of suffering and destruction? And here's the surprising answer. Jesus says "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

How can Jesus say that these ominous and downright scary events are signs of our redemption? When we step back and look at the whole of Luke's gospel – and really the whole of our lives – we see that we live and work and love and struggle between two great events of God coming into the world. The first event is the coming of Christ into the world in the flesh to show us the pattern of real life in his Crucifixion Resurrection. The second event is the coming of Christ at the end of time to redeem all the powers of earth and heaven. But we live in this "in-between" time. And even through this time is filled with tension and struggle, it's also a time of courage and hope because we know that the end of the story, even though it's not here yet, has been written by the Resurrected Christ.

The lives we're living in right now feel cataclysmic, don't they? Syria, Beirut, Paris, Sandy Hook Elementary School, Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, Umpqua Community College, The Aurora LO Theater, Marysville HS, and just on Friday, Colorado Springs.

If we're afraid to go out cheering these holidays for fear of a terrorist attack, either from abroad or from a young white male with too easy access to too many automatic weapons, we need to remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our

redemption has drawn near in Jesus. If we're too afraid to offer hospitality to those fleeing terrorism in their own countries because we're afraid that they might be terrorists, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption in Jesus has already drawn near. And we might also remember that Jesus and his family were also refugees fleeing the state sponsored terrorism of King Herod.

You know, I really don't think that terrorism, whether it's from abroad or the home-grown kind, is the greatest threat. I think our greatest threat is fear. Fear that makes us forget who we are as people of God. Fear that makes us see helpless people in need as our enemies. Fear that causes us to blame and scapegoat millions of innocent people because of the hateful actions of a demented fringe group. As a Christian, I'm mighty glad you and I don't get blamed every time the Ku Klux Klan burns a cross and calls for white supremacy in Jesus' name. No, fear is more dangerous than terrorism because it causes us to forget that we are God's people and to forget our deepest values. Jesus reminds us that he is the Lord of history and that he will bring all things to a good end.

So in the meantime, we can stand up and raise our heads together in courage and compassion and treat others – all the others in the world – with the love of God we have known in Christ Jesus. This hope and this courage is what makes a Christian community. It's the hope we hear every time we hear someone in the Bible say, "Do not be afraid." Do you know that the words, "Do not be afraid" are said exactly 365 times in the Bible? I'm just saying...so when we find ourselves thinking or acting out of fear instead of hope and courage, just remember that. For each day of the year, "Do not be afraid."

So in these times of cataclysmic change, St. Thomas is a place of light and hope and courage and confidence. This past Thursday it was so moving to watch this community share hope and courage and love with hungry people for whom hope might have been in short supply. In the midst of cataclysmic change, St. Thomas is a place where the light of Christ can be found thriving in the darkness.

St. Thomas is a place where, when we grow fearful, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption in Jesus has drawn near. And we don't do any of this alone. We have each other for love and support and hope in Jesus Christ.

So, where am I going? Where are you going? In the end, we are each headed to the same place, we just might take different roads to get there. But which one road you take, stay alert. Stay awake. Look for the signs and the markers. And keep your head up. Your redemption in Jesus has already drawn near. Amen.