

The Advent wreath with its first candle lit  
and the lovely blue paraments hanging here in the chancel  
both seem to be saying,  
“Look here!... LOOK AT ME!”

That’s the way it should be today.

Advent is a season for getting READY, ready for when Jesus comes,  
and an important part of getting READY is  
LEARNING WHERE TO LOOK.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus says so too.  
As I read His words, listen for the places where we are urged to LOOK...

**READ THE TEXT – Luke 21:27-38**

Where are you looking just now?

The words I just read sound like a warning: LOOK OUT!

Like a golfer yelling “FORE!” and making everyone duck for cover.

Like the movie 2012, a sci-fi thriller in which an ancient Mayan prediction  
comes true and the earth’s crust crumbles apart, threatening all human life.

But no disaster movie could paint a more frightening scene  
than the one Jesus describes here in Luke 21...

Signs in the sun, moon, and stars  
Terror among the nations  
The roar of a rising ocean  
and the “powers of the heavens”  
shaken like a helpless rabbit in the mouth of a wolf!

These days it is not the science fiction writers, but scientists themselves, who furnish  
the scary details...

They tell us there’s a hole in the ozone layer,  
exposing us to deadly radiation, and  
that the rainforests are being devoured at the rate of 130 square miles every  
day, with the loss of 50,000 plant and animal species a year, and

that antibiotics are losing their effectiveness as microbes grow ever more resistant – so that one day diseases will overwhelm us.

More immediately frightening are the apocalyptic images delivered to our homes in the news...

Many of you were watching when, in the middle of a 1989 World Series game in San Francisco, a gigantic earthquake plunged Candlestick Park into darkness and collapsed buildings, bridges, and freeways, crushing scores of people to death.

Far worse was what we saw unfold on that September morning in 2001, when hijacked jets were flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing thousands.

It all makes us want to duck, to say “LOOK OUT!”

At times we may even say it about GOD,  
as if He were that wolf and we the hapless rabbit dangling in His mouth!

Some of us, I know, grew up with the notion that God is  
“out to get us” – waiting for us to stumble, then pouncing on us to condemn.

In his novel *PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*, James Joyce tells the story of an Irish Catholic boy who is given such a picture...

In one scene, the boy listens to a priest describe in excruciating detail the terrors of hell... a vision that frightens the boy and drives him in tears to the confessional booth.

Martin Luther heard the same message as he grew up – a message that warned  
“LOOK OUT! God is after you!” with the result that, for a long time, he admitted that instead of loving God, he feared and hated God.

Even those of us who did not grow up with such a heavy dose of fear often find ourselves looking anxiously back over our shoulders...

“Things have gone TOO well,” one woman confessed to me. “Now I’m wondering what disaster He will send to even things up.”

We may be sure there is a GOD!

Certainly, too, there is a Judgment Day to come, and a frightful HELL for those who stubbornly rebel. It’s what Jesus meant by “THAT DAY...”

But surely there is more to God than that,  
and much better news to hear in this Advent Season.

So my message to you is not “LOOK OUT!”

What, then?

For many people,  
life is simply too full, and they are too occupied to be looking OUT.  
If anywhere, they are LOOKING DOWN...

DOWN at their dinner plates  
down at their work schedules and appointment books,  
down at the stack of bills on the counter,  
and the floor that needs sweeping  
and the baby that’s crying to be changed.

If you’re looking DOWN,  
you won’t be READY for what’s coming.

In the skies over Minneapolis,  
two Northwest airlines pilots explained that they were looking down  
at their laptops in the cockpit, got engrossed,  
and missed their flight destination by 150 miles.

In London, I’m told,  
a pedestrian was looking down at his cell phone,  
so busy texting that he ran into a light post and had to be taken to the  
hospital!

**“Take heed,” warned Jesus, “lest your hearts be weighed down  
with dissipation and drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will  
close on you unexpectedly like a trap.”**

There’s another way we look DOWN – and that is, very simply, in SADNESS.

The holidays can bring it home to us with bitter clarity  
that we have experienced some losses – especially when our family circle  
is broken by distance  
or animosity  
or death.

When we lived in Ohio, I recall visiting a man in a nursing home.

His name was Jake, and he was a decent man, but one of the gloomiest people I'd ever met. His wife was dead, and his health was in decline.

His body posture expressed volumes. he sat slumped on the edge of his bed, back bent, head lowered, eyes fixed on the floor.

When we are looking DOWN like that,  
we miss the joys and the beauties God has prepared for us.

Imagine a hiker on the spectacular Pacific Crest Trail.

But instead of enjoying the vistas that meet him at every turn – the towering fir trees, the soaring mountains, or the rushing waterfalls – his eyes are glued to the path, afraid he will trip on a rock or a root.

He looks down, and he misses out!

God has set us on our path, and prepared something wondrous up ahead.

Lest we live looking down, and so miss what God is preparing,  
I bring you a message about getting ready that can be summed up in two words:  
**LOOK UP!**

I read that the Pilgrims in the Massachusetts Colony  
appointed one of the deacons in their church services to walk around the  
sanctuary looking for people who went to sleep during the sermons.

The deacon was equipped with a feather and a pole –  
the feather for tickling the women under their chins,  
the pole to be used in a less gentle way on the heads of the men!

But we don't need that here, do we?

For we have something BETTER to keep us awake – the word of promise from  
Jesus Himself, who says here:

**When these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads,  
because your REDEMPTION is drawing near!**

LOOK UP, says the candle on the Advent wreath.  
LOOK UP to God, who is our Light and our Hope.

“Lift those sad eyes!”

One day when I went to visit my sad friend Jake in the nursing home,  
I read him a passage from Psalm 121: “**I will lift up my eyes to the hills.**”

Jake did look up as I read.

I told him that even though there were many sad things in his life,  
he still had a God who cared, and that Jesus would deliver him from  
his sadness.

Jake listened. Shall we not listen too?

LOOK UP! That is to say, BE HOPEFUL!

That’s what those blue paraments are saying by their color.

For the color blue is the color of HOPE, as in blue skies and blue birds...

What’s our HOPE?

Jesus says it: “**Your redemption draws near.**”

J. B. Phillips translated it: “You will soon be free.”

Jesus says it because He’s in the process of doing it. He’s the Liberator.

Just as, at the end of World War 2, the allies liberated the emaciated prisoners  
from a score of concentration camps,

so Jesus liberates us from the chains of our sinful habits, our griefs and cares,  
and from the fear of death.

When He went to the cross, He cut those chains.

When he rose from death, he swung our cell doors open.

When He comes back, He will take us by the hand and lead us HOME!

FAITH is...a LOOKING UP at Jesus, with the sure expectation  
that He is coming, and that He will do what He has promised.

Faith does what He has directed us to do: **Be always on the watch and pray!**

That’s what occupies us as we gather like this:

We help each other look up and LISTEN.

We encourage each other to lift up our eyes in PRAYER.

That’s how the Hebrew people prayed, by the way – looking UP,  
arms outstretched, to express with their bodies the FAITH  
that they would receive from God what they were asking.

We are so accustomed to LOOKING DOWN, even in our praying!  
It might be a good idea for us to LOOK UP now and then, literally,  
to express our expectant trust that God hears and will help.

Where have YOU been looking lately?

I invite you in this Advent season that begins today to LOOK...  
not LOOK OUT!  
not LOOK DOWN....

but LOOK UP to Jesus, coming as your Liberator.

Yes, there are sins to confess,  
but let's not do that gloomily, absorbed in how guilty we ought to feel,  
but in the hopeful expectation of His pardon.  
**OUR SAVIOR IS COMING!**

Yes, there is trouble aplenty in the world,  
and yes, often some confusion and frustration in the church, too!

But let us not be so morbid and downcast.

If we learn to read the signs of these times aright,  
we will discover that what we are watching is not the throes of death,  
but the pangs of BIRTH of the Kingdom of God.  
**JESUS OUR SAVIOR IS COMING!**

Don't be hypnotized by the crashing waves.  
Look UP to Him, who comes to take us through these storms and into  
our safe harbor.

Centuries ago, the earliest sailors who rounded the tip of Africa  
encountered raging STORMS, and they called that place "The Cape of Storms"  
to warn future mariners who sailed that way...

Later there came a man whose confidence of finding treasures in India  
was so great, he did not hang back...

Vasco da Gama sailed around that Cape successfully,  
and he re-named it "THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE,"  
the name it still bears today.

In this season, filled though it may be with fears,  
and weighed down with distractions,  
let us claim that same attitude.

Knowing the promise of our Lord, and the redemption that draws near,  
let us LOOK UP  
and claim these coming four weeks of Advent as a  
“SEASON OF GOOD HOPE.”

That’s the way to be ready when Christmas comes....when Jesus comes.

Now may the peace of God...