

The Church of the Transfiguration
The First Sunday of Advent
Luke 21:25-26

Lift Up Thine Eyes

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One of my favorite works of art is a painting by Norman Rockwell. The painting is called “Lift Up Thine Eyes” [Figure 1]. I actually have a copy of it hanging in my office.

The painting shows the façade of a large city church during rush hour. On the sidewalk, right in front of the church, there are lots of people walking briskly to their destinations. Interestingly, everyone on the sidewalk – every single person – is looking down at the ground, deep in thought.

Nobody is looking straight ahead. Nobody is looking sideways. And certainly nobody is looking up.

The irony is that, just above the heads of all these people, there’s a church announcement board with the title of the week’s sermon: “Lift Up Thine Eyes.” And just above the announcement board, there’s a flock of beautiful white doves flying in front of the church.

The people on the sidewalk are so busy looking down that they never see the announcement board or the doves that are flying overhead!

Although this Norman Rockwell painting dates back to 1957 – almost seven decades ago – it still remains surprisingly relevant today. I don’t know about you, but whenever I’m out and about, I often try hard not to bump into people who are looking down at their cell phones while walking.

I saw a funny cartoon about this the other day. A person is walking down a busy sidewalk while looking down at an app on his phone. The person says to his friend: “It’s an app that shows all of the people walking towards me so I never have to look up from my phone” [Figure 2].

Lift up thine eyes.

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Today is the First Sunday of Advent. It’s the beginning of a new church year. The long season of ordinary time has ended, and we start our journey once again through the seasons – and colors – of the liturgical year.

For those of you who are liturgical nerds, we are beginning “Year C,” which means that most of the gospel readings for the year are taken from the third gospel, or the Gospel According to St. Luke.

But Advent is not just about the new liturgical year. It’s also a season of waiting and anticipation.

In this age of instant information and gratification – when you can get anything from a car to a meal to a date on your phone within minutes – there is something holy about slowing down and waiting.

To be sure, Advent is about waiting for the baby Jesus to arrive at the creche on Christmas Eve. But Advent isn't just about waiting to celebrate the first coming of Jesus Christ from two thousand years ago. Advent is also about waiting for the second coming, when Christ Jesus – as King of Kings and Lord of Lords – will (as we say in the Nicene Creed) come again to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

As Episcopalians, we don't usually spend a lot of time talking about things like the rapture or the Last Judgment. But there is a lot of apocalyptic imagery in today's gospel text. Jesus tells us that, at the end times, we can expect to see things like "distress among the nations," the "roaring of the seas and the waves," and people "fainting from fear and foreboding."

So what should we do if and when we see these frightening things? Should we cower and hide? Should we become paralyzed with fear? Should we be overcome by despair? No. Jesus tells us in today's gospel to "stand up" and to "raise [our] heads," because our "redemption is drawing near."

In other words, instead of being overwhelmed by all of the horrible things that are happening around us, we are told by Jesus to look up. We are to look up because that is where we will see the "Son of Man coming in a cloud." We are to lift up our heads because that is the place from which we will be redeemed.

Lift up thine eyes.

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I recently came across a sermon that the German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached on the First Sunday of Advent in 1933, some ninety years ago.

Some of you may have heard of Bonhoeffer. He is one of the saints that the Episcopal Church commemorates in our sanctoral calendar. (His feast day is April 9th.) Bonhoeffer is also one of the ten "modern martyrs" of the 20th century whose statues stand above the west door of Westminster Abbey.

Bonhoeffer is best known for resisting the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich in Nazi Germany. As the leader of the confessing church movement, Bonhoeffer opposed the idolatrous use of Christianity to justify fascism in the name of Jesus Christ.

Although he was a pacifist, Bonhoeffer was ultimately caught up in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He was arrested, imprisoned, and executed at the age of 39.

Anyway, Bonhoeffer was visiting London during the First Sunday of Advent in 1933, and he preached a powerful sermon there about the importance of lifting up our eyes.

Things were looking bleak for Europe in December of 1933. The Nazi party had seized power in Germany during the national elections earlier that year. Hitler had become the chancellor, and he had already suspended many of the constitutional rights of the German people. Hitler's political opponents were being arrested, minority groups were being scapegoated, and concentration camps were being constructed.

On the First Sunday of Advent in 1933, Bonhoeffer urged the parishioners in that London church to look up. He told them about the story of a coal miner who had been recently trapped in a British mine due to an accident. There was nothing that the coal miner could do to save himself, except to wait to be rescued. The coal miner was terrified and thought that he was going to die.

But instead of being paralyzed with fear, he stayed calm, raised his head, and focused on what was above him. And, before long, the coal miner heard the sound of hammers and the individuals who ultimately broke through and rescued him.

For Bonhoeffer, the season of Advent is just like the situation of the coal miner. We are all trapped in a world that is bound by sinful circumstances – oppression, cruelty, persecution, and suffering. Because of this, we are unable to save ourselves. All we can do is to wait to be rescued.

But instead of panicking and losing hope, we must stay calm. We must have the courage to raise our heads and focus our attention on what is above us. Because that is the only place from which our redemption will come.

Lift up thine eyes.

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I suspect the past month has been very difficult for many of you. It's certainly been hard for me. Whether you might be struggling because of the recent elections, because of financial or health challenges, or because of fear, guilt, or loneliness, do not give up hope. Do not be distracted by the apocalyptic circumstances that surround us. Rather, stay focused and remain hopeful – because Advent promises us that our redemption is drawing near.

Instead of looking down – like the people in the Norman Rockwell painting – we must stand up and raise our heads. To quote Bonhoeffer:

What the first of Advent says is no different: Your redemption is near! It is knocking at your door now; can you hear it? . . . [Jesus] keeps calling to us during these very weeks of waiting, waiting for Christmas, to tell us that he is coming, that he alone will rescue us from the prison of our existence, out of our fear, our guilt, and our loneliness.

Lift up thine eyes. For that is where we will find our redemption. And that is where we will find our Savior, Jesus Christ.

May you all have a blessed start to the Advent season.

Figure 1



Figure 2

