

"Places of Advent: The Clouds"
Matthew 24:29-30 & 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

December 16, 2015

3rd Advent Service

Clouds are nice. Most people like white, fluffy clouds. People enjoy watching clouds, taking pictures of clouds, post pictures of clouds on Facebook, and so on. Why? Clouds are beautiful and so give comfort and enjoyment to people. Those are good clouds. But dark storm (thunder) clouds are different. People don't like those kinds of clouds. They are frightening, dangerous, and may lead to death if the STORM is bad enough. Those are bad clouds.

During Advent, we have learned that God's plan for saving humanity began in a lush garden. Jesus, the Son of God, came to carry out that plan. He began in a rough wooden manger and then moved to a rough wooden cross. Tonight, we learn that Jesus will come again on clouds. Are these good clouds or bad clouds? What do Jesus' clouds mean for us?

Our first reading for tonight describes the Last Days and it is very frightening. There will be great tribulation. The sun will be darkened. The moon will not shine. Stars will fall from heaven. The powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then Jesus will come. But who is that Jesus? Is this the cute baby of Bethlehem? No. Is this the kind teacher who healed the sick, fed the hungry, helped the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and who made dead people alive? No. Is this the weak Savior, hanging on the cross, suffering and dying? No. This is a much different Jesus. One writer described it this way, "At one time the Son of man appeared on earth in lowliness and allowed himself to be crucified; but at the end his omnipotence and his great glory will be fully displayed."
(Lenski, p.949)

But power and glory are good things, aren't they? Don't we want to see Jesus' power and glory? Our text says that, when Jesus appears and comes on the clouds with power and glory, "all the tribes on the earth will mourn." Why will people feel sad when they see Jesus coming on the clouds? The reason for Jesus' coming will create fear and sadness for many people.

The meaning of the clouds is important here. The clouds mean more than Jesus' power and glory. The clouds symbolize divine judgment. When Jesus comes again on the clouds, He is not coming to help people. He is not coming to save people. Jesus is coming to judge people. And judgment means condemnation (guilt) and everlasting punishment.

Jesus' standard (way) for judgment requires every person is to be perfect as He is perfect. This means never ever doing, saying or even thinking anything bad, contrary to the Law of God. But there's more. This also means always doing, saying, and thinking only what is good, in agreement with the Law of God. People who are perfect in that way will not fear Jesus coming on the clouds, but will welcome Him.

But it is a different story for people are not perfect. Are you perfect? Do you never do, say, and think bad and do you always do, say, and think only good 24 hours a day, 7 days a week? If not, then these may be scary clouds for you when Jesus comes again. But Jesus' second coming is frightening only if we forget about His first coming. And Jesus' first coming is about more than His birth as a baby in Bethlehem.

That baby left the manger, grew up, and lived a perfect life, never doing bad and always doing good. But He didn't do it for Himself. He did it for you and in your place. He died a horrible death as a Law breaker. But He didn't do that because He deserved it but because you deserved it. He did it for you and in your place.

In (because) your baptism, you are connected to Jesus' life. His obedience becomes your obedience. His perfect life becomes your perfect life. You are also connected to Jesus' death and burial. His death for the sin of the world becomes your death for your sins. When you got baptized, you died, were buried, and rose again to new life. Now God looks at you and sees Jesus. He sees Jesus' perfect life, not your imperfect life. He does not see your sin but He sees Jesus' sacrifice for your sin in His death. He sees you as perfect.

That means the clouds change for us as we wait for Jesus to come again. We do not mourn or feel sad. We wait eagerly and excitedly like the people of THESSALONICA in our second lesson

tonight. Those people were worrying about Christians who had “fallen asleep” (i.e. died) before Jesus came again. They thought maybe they were gone. Paul tells them it is okay to mourn but still have hope for the future. Why? When Jesus descends from heaven on the clouds, He is coming to save His people. All the Christians who have died will come down with Him. People who are still alive will go up to meet them. And where will they meet them? In (on) the clouds! Paul says, “And so we will always be with the Lord.”

Paul goes on to say, “Encourage one another with these words.” This message has much comfort and encouragement for these dark and dreary days that we experience now. The trials and tribulations will not last. Jesus is coming again on the clouds to judge the living and the dead. But Jesus is not coming to judge and condemn us who trust in Him. Jesus is coming on the clouds to save us and bring us to heaven.

So now we live lives of repentance and faith, neither fearing God’s wrath nor taking God’s blessing for granted. When the clouds become darker and life gets worse, do not panic or give up. This is not a time to be negative but positive. In fact, Jesus says, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:28) That’s exciting! The baby of Bethlehem who was born in a manger and went to a cross for us and our sin is coming back for us and our everlasting life. It is now time to celebrate Christmas, the start of Jesus’ work for us. As the old Christmas hymn goes, “Oh, come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord.” Amen.