

Luke 21:5-28

If you have seen a live stage performance, a play for example, where a large curtain separates the performers from the audience, then you know that it takes awhile for the stage hands to change the scene when the curtain is lowered. This is the time when people in the audience will get up and stretch their legs, they will go to the restroom, they will go to the concession stand for something to eat and drink. It can become pretty noisy out in the lobby during the scene change. People talk about the play and the performers. They may spot friends and coworkers and get together with them to chat. When the next act is almost ready, and before the curtain rises, it is common for the theater to blink the lobby lights off and on a number of times. This alerts the audience members that it is time to get back into their seats before the raising of the curtain.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus speaks about that which is to come. And His words must be divided into three sections. The first part, from verses 5-19, refers to the entire New Testament period. The second part, verses 20-24, refers specifically to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the year 70. The third and final part, verses 25-28, speaks of the time from that destruction until the end of the world.

Now we might wonder why Jesus spends so much time talking about the destruction of Jerusalem. It was big news when it happened. It was more catastrophic than the typhoon in the Philippines a week ago. But it's almost ancient history for us. The desolation and distress, the trampling underfoot of the entire city, the outright slaughter--it's interesting, but does not appear to be all that relevant to people living after the year 70, much less to us living nearly 2,000 years later.

But we do need to pay close attention to Jesus' words, and here's why. The destruction of Jerusalem is the last time that the curtain was raised. We can say that after Jerusalem was destroyed, the curtain was then lowered for a scene change. And the next time the curtain will be raised will be the last time. When the curtain is raised again, it will be at the end of the world.

And so if you look around you, you see everyone up stretching their legs. People are going to the restroom. They're eating and drinking. They're getting with friends. They're off getting married. They're out deer hunting, out harvesting their crops. They're busy with life. And I suppose it's easy to see why. The curtain has been lowered for the last 1,943 years. That is one long scene change! You hear audience members out there in the lobby talking like that's it, the play is not going to continue, Jesus is never coming back, so we should just get on with life and forget about what the Bible says. And many do just that. Many audience members have left the theater. They've headed home. That's why churches have so many empty seats. Even their own members have found other things to do rather than wait with the faithful for the curtain to rise.

We're distracted too. Sitting in the theater seat all the time can become pretty monotonous. The view never really changes much. The same altar and pulpit week after week. The same hymns and orders of service. The same creeds and confessions. The same man in a white robe always up in front by the stage speaking the same words over and over Sunday after Sunday. We become distracted. We get busy with life. We're out in the lobby doing this and that. And we, too, are tempted to forget about the performance, to doubt that it's really worth it to be sober and vigilant, fighting the good fight as Christians as we wait for the curtain to rise.

But did you notice the lobby lights flickering a week or so ago? The theater lights turned off and on as the massive typhoon hit the Philippines. And they flickered before that when horrendous tornados

ravaged Oklahoma. And before that the lights flickered off and on when hurricane Sandy hit the East Coast. We're being warned: Get back into your seats! The curtain can be raised at any moment. We do not stop living, but we get back to our seats by keeping faithful watch even as we engage with the world around us.

Every time there is a war--"*nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom*"- God is turning the lobby lights off and on. When He allows earthquakes, and famines, and pestilences, God is causing the lights to flicker. And many audience members become frightened. The last time the curtain was raised there was destruction, and violence, and bloodshed. It was terrifying. And so every time the lights flicker, people cringe, they faint with fear, they are perplexed--not knowing what to do and where to go--as our text puts it. They are not ready for the curtain to be raised. They are not ready for the end of the world. They do not know where to turn. They are distressed and try to ignore the lights flickering off and on.

But that's not how God wants you to react. Yes, the last time the curtain was raised, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. But the curtain has been lowered for a scene change. The performers are changing their costumes. The stage hands are changing the setting. When the curtain rises again, we will see Jerusalem, but not the old Jerusalem destroyed by the Gentiles. We will see the new Jerusalem "*coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband.*" (Rev. 21) And we will see, not the old temple with "*not one stone left upon another.*" We will see living temples--the saints of God rising in bright array being carried into the beautiful city prepared for them--the new Jerusalem. That's quite a scene change. No wonder it's taking so long. God is waiting for all His elect in Christ to be born and baptized--keeping them "*faithful unto death to receive the crown of life.*"

You see, Jesus changed the scene. He changed the setting. He suffered, died, and rose again. When He was on the cross, Jesus became the temple that was torn down. Not one stone was left upon another. They took His body down and buried it in the tomb. But if this happened to Jesus, then it will not happen to you. You will die, yes, but as God's living temples, baptized into Jesus, you live with Christ even when you die. You and I deserve judgment, yes, harsh judgment for our grievous sins. But God judged His Son in your place. There is no destruction and distress for you. Jesus took it. God forgives you. All of you are forgiven because of Jesus.

And so God has changed the scene. When the curtain rises, you can raise your head with joy and confidence, for the new Jerusalem awaits you--the angels singing, the Father's welcome. When the curtain rises, you my friends who are baptized into Christ and in your seats faithfully watching and waiting for it to happen--when the curtain is raised, you will see Jesus saying to you, "Come, here is your mansion in heaven which I have prepared for you."

And so let the lobby lights flicker off and on. We're ready. We're in our seats. The Sacrament is before us. And here on the altar, it is for us, a glimpse of what is behind the curtain. It is the foretaste of the feast to come. Let the curtain rise. For when it does, we will "*straighten up and raise our heads, for our redemption is drawing near.*" Amen.