

## “Make Him Room”

Luke 21:25-36

Sermon by Jan Edmiston – Fairlington Presbyterian Church  
December 3, 2006 – First Sunday in Advent



*Note: Luke 21 is one of the Biblical accounts predicting the “parousia” which means “the coming” – as in the coming of Christ. In ancient times, the Greeks used the word “parousia” to describe the coming of royalty. And we Christians read this passage believing that – indeed – a royal guest is coming. But he is no ordinary royal guest.*

This is the first Sunday in Advent. Thanksgiving weekend seems like ages ago. And Christmas Eve is a quick 3 weeks from today. So, with one major holiday behind us and another coming up . . .

Raise your hands if you went to somebody else’s house for Thanksgiving. Raise your hands if you hosted guests at your house for Thanksgiving.

Raise your hands if you plan to go to somebody else’s house for Christmas. Now raise your hands if you have invited someone to come to your place for Christmas.

I can assure you – wherever you will spend the holidays – **the preparations have begun.**

When I was a child and we had people coming over for Thanksgiving, my mother took the opportunity – not just to clean the house and decorate; she always convinced my father to do some major work on the house before the guests arrived: We might replace the curtains in the living room or the re-carpet in the den. But if she was really on a roll, we might re-roof the house, or turn the carport into a rec room. She used the excuse of guests coming over to overhaul the premises.

Needless to say, we were not often the hosts for Thanksgiving. We tended to go to my grandparents’ house.

But when my mother *was* the hostess, she went all out. She kept a three-ring notebook – now in my sister’s possession – with notes from all the social events she ever hosted at our house – from the rare Thanksgiving dinners at our table (instead of our Grandparents’) to the Circle Meetings held in our living room to the graduation dinners after high school.

In the notebook, she wrote down the names of everyone who came, what she served, and what people seemed to like and *not* like – so that if she ever invited the same people for a second or third or fourth time, she would remember what her guests especially enjoyed and what they did not enjoy as much. She wrote down conversational

subjects to talk about (or not talk about). “Note to self: Don’t ask Mr. Hayes about his secretary.”

She wrote notes about allergies and personal tastes – who couldn’t eat peanut butter pie, who wouldn’t eat red meat. She wanted her guests to feel comfortable and happy and welcomed in our home.

This is the kind of hospitality that – frankly – I don’t do very well. It takes a great deal of time to do this: to make every corner cozy, to pay attention to every detail, to want to know your guests so well that every feature will express how special they are, how much you love them and want them to be there. Great hospitality is not about the hosts. It’s about the guests.

This kind of hospitality is not fake. It’s not drenched in guilt. It’s not strained. You don’t get the sense they are trying to impress you or that they feel burdened in any way.

I saw a plaque recently that says it well:

*Never confuse hospitality with endurance.*

Real hospitality is not about endurance. It’s about grace and love.

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Advent is all about hospitality – not the kind that involves cleaning out the guest room because relatives are coming. It’s not about re-living the Pillsbury bake-off in your kitchen because you are hosting the office party this year.

It’s not about hanging the wreath and decorating the tree and setting candles in the windows – although that’s part of the fun. We might get stressed-out about those things, but actually, those things describe the easy part.

<p>Advent is about making room for the One who is “coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” Believe it or not – this is a much bigger deal than making room for your boss or your difficult uncle. We are talking about <b>preparing to welcome God into where we live.</b></p>
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There are signs that “the Son of Man” is coming – and I’m not talking about Christmas carols piped into stores. According to the Bible:

*There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. On the earth there will be distress among nations. People will faint with fear and foreboding . . . “for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”*

Clearly there is stress involved with these signs. And the stress is way bigger than the stress of hunting down a PlayStation 3.

There have always been people who pointed to earthquakes and tsunamis and thought they could predict the date of the *parousia* – the coming of Christ.<sup>1</sup> This is nothing new. When these words were written in Luke, the belief was that Jesus would return in the lifetime of the first followers of Jesus – sometime in the mid-First Century. But obviously, that didn't happen.

The ancient theologian Irenaeus believed that Jesus would come in the year **500**.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Innocent III taught that Christ would come in the year **1284**, coming up with this calculation by adding 666 years to the year that Islam was founded.<sup>3</sup> (Obviously, Pope Benedict is not the first papal leader to have issues with Muslims and he probably won't be the last.)

Throughout history both respected spiritual leaders and not-so-respected spiritual leaders have tried to predict when the parousia would occur. But the point of this passage is not to figure out a specific date: the point is to be ready, to prepare now and everyday for the coming of the most extraordinary guest in the universe.

When we prepare for the coming of the in-laws or the coming of the parents or the coming of the new girlfriend of our First Born Child – there is stress. We want to make a good impression. We want our guests to feel at home. And so there are certain things we do to get ready. And there are certain things we don't do to get ready.

The Bible reminds us that when preparing for the Son of Man we don't want to fog up our minds. We want to be sharp. Actually, Luke puts it this way:

***Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.***

We all know what drunkenness is. “Dissipation” in this case means – essentially – a hangover.<sup>4</sup> Someone is coming and you don't want to be sprawled out on the sofa with a wine-induced headache.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Second Coming” is not a Biblical term. “Parousia” is Greek for “coming.” N.T. Wright prefers the term “reappearing” – the Reappearing of Christ – in his book *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (page 219).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Abanes, *End-Time Visions*. Four Walls Eight Windows, New York, 1998, page 283. Irenaeus was influenced by Hippolytus who calculated that the Second Coming would occur 6000 years after creation which, for him, came to the year 500.

<sup>3</sup> Hillel Schwartz, *Century's End: An Orientation Manual Toward the Year 2000*. Doubleday, New York, 1996, page 181.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek word used here is *kraipale* {krahee-pal'-ay} which means “the giddiness and headache associated with drinking too much.”

That's what we should not do – be foggy-minded. And here's what we should do: Be alert (the opposite of drunkenness). Be spiritually strong. Notice what's going on around us.

Do we even see the homeless person sitting on the sidewalk? Do we notice that the cashier in the grocery store seems troubled?

In other words, we could have a home that would make Martha Stewart proud, but God doesn't care about that. God cares about what's going on inside our souls. What are we noticing and what are we ignoring? God wants us to be ready *spiritually*.

And this involves being prepared to receive the stranger.

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A word about Middle Eastern hospitality: even today, people throughout the Middle East are excellent at offering hospitality, and it doesn't have anything to do with how fancy their homes are. I've been welcomed into a Bedouin tent in the desert and I've been welcomed into an upper-class home in a Middle Eastern capital city, and the hospitality was the same. I was a stranger, an alien in both settings and my hosts treated me as if they were expecting some sort of "parousia" – the coming of an honored guest.

Hospitality towards a stranger is an especially holy practice.

The Hebrew scriptures – the Old Testament – speak of this<sup>5</sup>. Strangers are more vulnerable, often hungry or thirsty. It was a grave sin not to welcome a stranger into your home. In fact, most people think that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah had to do with sexuality. Actually – it was about hospitality. You can look it up.<sup>6</sup>

Not to be ready for a guest – especially a stranger, an alien in your land – was a most grievous sin against God.

This makes the Christmas story all the more scandalous in that Joseph was a stranger in Bethlehem and his wife Mary was clearly in need of a room – being "with child" and all – and there was no place to go. God comes to earth as a human baby and there was no one to welcome him in as he entered the world. He came as a stranger – as a poor child – rather than as a king, the way he was expected. And the locals in Bethlehem didn't notice that *this tiny baby*, born to poor, traveling parents was in fact the Christ child.

**This changes *everything* about the way we prepare for Christmas.** Chances are we've started our shopping. Maybe we have set up the tree or bought the cards. If you are really on the ball – maybe you've even mailed your cards.

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<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 18:2ff.

<sup>6</sup> See Ezekiel 16:49 – 50, Luke 10:10-13, Genesis 3:13, 18:20

But how have we prepared for the stranger?

I visited a church last Sunday that had a great idea: after they leave their worship services on Christmas Eve, they are taking cookies they've collected from bakers in the congregation and – on their way home from worship – they are stopping off at gas stations and hospitals and 24-hour stores and giving packets of cookies to strangers who have to work on Christmas Eve. This is the kind of thing I'm talking about: offering hospitality to strangers. This is how we prepare our hearts for the *parousia*. **This is how we make room for God.** We notice. We become aware. We begin to see the people we haven't seen before.

Today, we will celebrate the sacrament of communion together too. Chances are excellent that many of us are strangers to each other. We will come forward and take the bread and dip it into the cup, as if it's just an individual moment: me and God. But actually, it is a common cup that we share with everyone, a common loaf. We each receive a piece of the whole. All of us are part of this meal together.

So notice the others at the table. Pray for the ones you don't know. Smile at them. Welcome them. Care about them.

And one final thing: Jesus came into this world as a stranger. Very few people realized who he was – as a tiny baby born in a cave, as a young boy in the temple, as a man executed on a cross. But the ones who paid attention got it. They saw something in him that showed them the very face of God.

At this table, we call Jesus the host. *He* is the One who has invited *us*. And like the perfect host, he wants to know us – everything about us – so that we will be comfortable and happy and welcomed in his house. He is the host, but he was *even* willing to have his body broken and his blood spilled for the sake of his guests – the ones he loved.

We have the opportunity to receive from The Perfect Host today. And in the weeks to come, we will have countless opportunities to be like this Perfect Host. The signs are upon us that Christ could reappear at any time. Will we be ready? It's possible – and spiritually eye-opening – to realize that Christ might show up in the face of the stranger we meet. Will we even notice? Or will we be too busy looking over his shoulder, looking past her face to check out the lights flickering beyond them?