

This summer a young man took a solo hike out in Colorado. As the sun shone high in the sky he pulled off his shirt, bundled it up behind his head, and took a nap. He did not wake up when a large snake curled up on his naked stomach. He did wake up when a hawk swooped down and snatched away the snake in its talons. Some of the flesh from his stomach went away with the snake.

Did you ever have one of those days when you said, "Well, at least it can't get much worse than this." That's the day the disciples were having when Jesus gave this speech. And this is only the short version of how Jesus describes what lies ahead for his followers. The full text warns the disciples to expect the invasion of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, hatred, wars, insurrections, persecution, family betrayals, arrests, trials, imprisonments, captivity, earthquakes, famine, and plagues. After that, Jesus says, things are gonna get bad--eclipses, falling stars, tidal waves, and the general destruction of the world as we know it. Nothing like the first Sunday of Advent to get you into that holiday spirit!

You'll be happy to hear, almost everything Jesus predicted already lies in the past. Luke, who wrote this text, also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, and he describes the persecution of the disciples in much the same way Jesus predicts it will happen here. What hasn't happened, of course, is the final destruction. Luke doesn't even try to predict when that will occur. He just reports that at the end of time, no matter how awful things may get, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, will come with power and great glory. What are we to do? Jesus gives very general instructions here: Be on guard, be alert, pray, and live a moral life. He says, you'll be ready.

For most people, what occupies their concern is not the end of the world, but how fragile life is. Accidents, violence, and disease lurk at the dark edges of life. We never know when some swooping hawk could change our lives completely.

The advice Jesus gives today will also prepare us for whatever tragedy may enter our life: Be on guard, be alert, pray, and live a moral life. Then, if tragedy happens, you'll be ready. Remember the basic message of this Gospel is, no matter how much chaos abounds, it does not disprove the power of God. When tragedy comes, Christ comes as with it, to reign.

The point of Advent is to prepare for the coming of Christ. Let us spend this season alert and prayerful so that if tragedy should ever befall us it will enter a home where Christ already abides.