

The Journey Begins

Jeremiah 33:14-16 & Luke 21: 25-36

First Sunday of Advent/ 3rd December 2006/ Sacrament of Holy Communion

It's always odd to hear these disturbing texts right at the start of Advent. Every year the lectionary offers similar verses of cosmic disaster at the beginning of what everyone else except the church calls the "the Christmas season." And my guess is, if we're honest, we probably don't like to hear them. They just sound weird to our sensibilities. Plus, they're depressing. "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom," Jesus says earlier in this same chapter of Luke, "there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven." We will see signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves." What is Jesus talking about? Countless folks across the ages have tried to decipher their meaning. Could Jesus be talking about super typhoons and mega hurricanes? Is he foretelling the geo-political crisis to come as a result of global warming, where, we're told, there would be increased famine throughout the world and wars over food and water? Is he warning us about the next avian flu pandemic? And plagues – what plagues? Do we have plagues anymore? Is the spread of AIDS our contemporary plague? Thirty million have died from AIDS since 1981. Is this what Jesus is talking about? Does all this portend to mean that we will soon see, as the prophet Daniel foresaw, "the Son of Man coming in a cloud (Daniel 7:13-14)," with power and great glory? Is this how we are to read these texts? Literally? Looking for the contemporary signs to somehow "prove" the veracity of Jesus' claims?

If it all sounds confusing – I'm with you. In verse 21:32, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Was Jesus, through Luke, talking about his own age, that his own time would experience these things? If not, here we are, thousands of years later, still waiting. We've had plenty of terrible earthquakes since Jesus' age. What then do we do with a text like this? This text, like Daniel and others like it, these apocalyptic texts revealing scenarios of ending that signal the coming of the Son of Man, meaning the Messiah, are so alien to the way we think and believe. Liberals tend to dismiss them altogether; conservatives take them literally. But I'm not sure this is what either Luke or Jesus intended.

Maybe I'm wrong about this, but I see this text and others like it offering warning as a way to get us to wake up, to see that all is not well with the world, to read the signs of the age as indicators that there's something fundamentally wrong with the heavens and the earth. All is not as it's supposed to be. These apocalyptic texts love startling images and provocative metaphors in order to break us free from routine, to remove us from one frame of reference and put us into a new one. So that by earthquake as metaphor, we are given an imaginative metaphor, maybe meaning nothing is firm; the former ways are coming to an end. Shifting tectonic plates means things are moving, changing. This is scary, but potentially good – as metaphor. In doing so, these images – shifting metaphors – become a kind of light cast upon shadows which help us to see the truth about ourselves, and the world, and ultimately our alienation from God.

But why a text like this in a season that is already too dull and nights are long? Why do we have to be reminded of just how messed up things are? Some folks like to come to church to escape daily life, but these texts don't allow it. Can't we just carve out a time when we focus on the good, celebrate with good cheer, indulge a little, revert to the innocence of a child? I once heard someone say, "Christmas is really for the children. It's not for adults." Can't we just sing hymns in major keys instead of those depressing hymns in minor keys?

We know the answer. We know why. *Just before dawn the night is at its darkest.* As the days grow shorter and darkness increases toward the winter solstice, a light is born that the darkness cannot extinguish. It's into such a world of war, hunger, death, destruction, pain, suffering, plagues, wild weather, and melting ice caps that God sends the Son of Man, sends the Human One. "Now when all these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

"The message of Advent is not that everything is falling to pieces." James Kay, professor at Princeton Seminary, wrote on this text, "We probably don't need Luke to tell us that. And certainly the message is not that God is in heaven and all is therefore well with the world. [Instead,] the message of Advent is that when heaven itself is spinning into oblivion, when every fixed star on the moral compass is wavering, when all hell is breaking loose on earth, 'your redemption is drawing near.'¹ A child is born into a world needing redemption. That was the kind of world into which Jesus was born. Not all that different from our

¹ James Kay, *Christian Century*, November 12, 1997.

own. So we might say Jesus is born again and again to redeem. Jesus' birth makes little sense otherwise. What would all the fuss be about?

Advent is a reality-check. The church is inviting us see the world as it is. It's a time to embrace the darkness and shadow, instead of denying it; it's a time to acknowledge the ambiguity and chaos that haunts our being, which we are all very good at denying, although some try through excessive shopping or our addictions or working so hard we don't have to think or feel what lives at depth of our souls. Advent is a time when we remember we need a Redeemer – that we cannot redeem ourselves or the world. What we hope for in our hearts cannot ultimately be achieved by us. Peace, healing, joy, meaning, purpose that we all want for ourselves and those we love cannot be realized through us. This redemption – in Jesus' time this word meant the freedom granted to a slave – redemption involves getting our life back from all that hinders and enslaves us, this redemption is not found within us, but only through *him*, not found within nature or history, but outside nature, beyond history. That's why Jesus wants us to pay attention, lest we miss it. Jesus warns against "dissipation." This is a rare word used only here in the New Testament which refers to a sense of nausea that comes after a wild night on the town. Advent invites us to be sober about our present state, don't try to numb your senses, but don't be overwhelmed by the world either, don't give into worry, anxiety or despair, direct your attention toward God's future, redemption is drawing near. It's not here, yet, but coming. It's journeying toward us, even as we journey toward it. It's on its way. And that future belongs to Jesus Christ. "If the future were not the promise of Jesus Christ," Kay writes, "but the predictable outcome of present times, despair would overwhelm us."

So that in Advent we journey on a road between two worlds, in a twilight place of shadow and darkness, with the world as it is on the way to a world redeemed, when our redemption draws near and light scatters the darkness. In this twilight and shadow, we need to pay attention, to keep our focus on what is coming, lest we become overwhelmed with the state of things as they are, lest we become overwhelmed by the current state of things or by disturbing portents in the heavens or on earth that cause us to fear.

As we begin Advent this year, this text calls us to be attentive. What's distracting us from being attentive to what God is birthing in our lives? What's needed to keep us alert? How can we deepen our prayer time so that we don't give into the stressing of the season? How can we withstand all the commercialism and crass materialism of Christmas that cheapen the Christmas

miracle? Where can we go for a moment of cleansing clarity, for that needed reality-check, where we can get perspective on what coming of our redemption means? Worship is the antidote. *Advent is the antidote.* As we journey toward Christmas morning, how do we want to feel when we get there? What kind of experience do we want? What kind of journey is the Spirit leading us on?

It's usually wise before embarking on any journey, particularly a long one, to eat a good meal. Perhaps it is here, at the table of our Lord, where we can feast on the food we need for the journey, to have the strength for lies ahead. It is here, at this table: the journey begins here.

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