

Jeremiah 33: 14-16
I Thessalonians 3: 9-13
Luke 21: 25-33

Drawing Near
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Today, the first Sunday in Advent, is the beginning of the New Year for Christians. It is the beginning of the waiting time for the arrival of Christ. The paradox here is that we also know Christ as one who is at the heart of the beginning, the end, and everywhere in-between, the Word of God. We constantly celebrate, in prayer and in song, the fact that Christ is already and always here. Still, as we wait liturgically for Jesus' birth, we start off with the description of a world in need of him. It is a world full of tumult and distress with the smoke and confusion of human violence and environmental crisis made plain before our eyes:

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

It may seem strange to us as we prepare for Christmas, but the lectionary readings at the beginning of Advent always include these passages from the end of Jesus' life. We are being asked to contemplate, not the first coming - a baby in a manger - but a second coming: the promised return of Christ. It seems dissonant, somehow, when we have been hearing Christmas carols in the stores for weeks now. On the other hand, the opening lines of this gospel reading sound like a typical TV news report on most days and on most channels.

And so I contemplate the various genres of story-telling. In our time it's TV, social media, films, Christmas carols, word of mouth, rumor. And in ancient times, it was these sacred writings. Jesus lived in a time in which apocalyptic literature flourished. This was a type of written prophecy that addressed the chaos of those times: the suffering, the religious and political turmoil, the “clash of civilizations” as Greek and then Roman empires marched across the Middle East and as different cultures came into closer contact than ever before. (I don't think I need to elaborate on the obvious parallel to our culture wars.) When people start to think and write this way, gone are the consoling words of a more insular earlier time: Jeremiah's “In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” Instead, we hear of distress and roaring and fainting and fear. Who likes hearing all of this when we're getting ready for Christmas?

But then I return to our present story-telling, especially the kind that entertains us. How many films can you think of that tell of a fearful, dystopian future? I can list a few, you could probably list many more: The Matrix, The Hunger Games, The Edge of Tomorrow, The Day After Tomorrow, The Giver, etc, etc. We are fascinated with what we fear: a world out of control, or under the control of evil powers. We are telling stories about what we fear about today, and projecting them onto the larger screen of tomorrow. Whether it is adolescents being used as fodder for a totalitarian regime, or a world disintegrating because of humanity's abuse of the environment, we gaze into a world in dire need. And, so often, these stories require a Messiah figure to lead us away from the results of our own failures. These are the stories we use now for entertainment, and, I

think, as a sort of exorcism of our worst fears. War, climate change, child abuse, powerlessness - we keep writing about our worst fears: they are already alive within us.

Let's think for a moment about what we share with the first century world of Jesus and his followers. Is it not this sense of threat, this crisis of meaning, this clash of civilizations that seems to require some more-than-human solution? So how do we respond? It is by medicating ourselves with entertainment, or by polarizing our discourse so that we cherry-pick for the good guys vs. the bad guys, or by retreating to oases of calm and prosperity? Those are the most common responses I see. Or - do we "stand up and raise our heads" knowing that our liberation is drawing near?" Do we adopt an especially alert and expectant posture, because God speaks in a certain language in our times of crisis.

The fact is, these old apocalyptic texts resonate in our time and in every time. Every time has its moral crisis and its painful clashes with the unknown. The one setting where the readings seem jarring is one of complete peace and comfort and self-satisfaction. If we are too comfortable, or too blind to the suffering of others, we turn aside from these readings as odd, quaint, historical artifacts. Apocalyptic imagery and language are forged in times of conflict and oppression, and they make us aware of our skewed vision. Maybe, when we feel contented and at ease in our daily lives, we are actually cut off from much of the rest of the world, and living in an ivory tower, a fool's paradise. Which feels pretty good, a lot of the time.

But, if we do that, we risk missing the other side of the image, the other dimension of change. Which is that God is waiting for us on the far side of calamity. We are to expect this. Rather than fainting with fear or numbing ourselves with intoxicants, we are told, "Stand up and raise your heads, because your liberation is near." It seems that Jesus is warning the disciples against missing the signs because they are either too frightened or alternatively too forgetful. And in our time of the 24-hour news and the bombardment of information about the world, fear and forgetting are natural. There is only so much stimulation the brain can absorb before it begins to filter the input and go numb. I have heard that American GI's describe "the thousand yard stare": that almost catatonic state where the mind self medicates and anesthetizes itself against the horrors witnessed.

In our over-stimulated and information saturated age, the words of Jesus encourage us to be grounded in another reality: the kingdom of God's reality and presence. In a world of conflict, it is a liberated, attentive, non-judgmental, vibrant place. It can be found in a manger in Bethlehem, at a holy meal on a Galilean hillside, at an empty tomb in Jerusalem. And it can be found in an alert and trusting heart, overflowing with compassion for a world in turmoil and neighbors in need.

One line in the reading from Luke has often puzzled readers. After speaking of the way that a sprouting fig trees can indicate the arrival of summer, Jesus says that "you will know that the kingdom of God is near" and "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." We can try to locate his predictions in first century Judah. The city of Jerusalem did experience an apocalyptic sort of destruction a generation after the first Easter. But in some ways Jesus was not looking at 35 years or thousand years or two thousand years ahead: he was speaking of the lifetime of each listener. It seems that all these dramatic events are not just a distant expectation or hope, but close to each person who keeps aware and awake, to each person who watches things like the sun and moon and stars and fig trees and distress among nations. So I don't think that Jesus was talking about calendar time here - years and centuries and millennia. He was

talking about our common human experience, our common worldly upheavals, our common fear and foreboding. With words of warning and words of reassurance, he asks us to wake up, stand up, and raise our heads. For each one, and in each lifetime, the kingdom of God draws near.

Speaking of storytelling, let me share one more current story that shows the ways that the Kingdom of God appears in the midst of and in spite of distress and foreboding. It was posted on facebook by Antoine Leiris, whose wife died at the Bataclan in Paris on November 13th. It was shared with the world but addressed to those who took her life. In his video, Leiris says:

"Friday night, you took an exceptional life--the love of my life, the mother of my son--but you will not have my hatred. I don't know who you are and I don't want to know, you are dead souls. If the God for whom you kill so blindly made us in His image, each bullet in my wife's body would have been a wound in his heart. Therefore, I will not give you the gift of hating you. You have obviously sought it, but responding to it with anger would be giving in to the same ignorance that has made you what you are. You want me to be afraid? To cast a mistrustful eye on my fellow citizens? To sacrifice my freedom for security? You lost. Same player. Same game. I saw her this morning, finally, after nights and days of waiting. She was just as beautiful as she was when she left on Friday evening. As beautiful as when I fell madly in love with her more than 12 years ago. Of course I am devastated with grief – I will give you that tiny victory. But this will be a short-term grief. I know that she will join us every day, and that we will find each other again in the paradise of free souls. Which you will never have access to. We are only two, my son and I, but we are more powerful than all the world's armies. In any case, I have no more time to waste on you. I need to get back to Melvil, who is waking up from his afternoon nap. He is just 17 months old. He will eat his snack like every day and then we are going to play like we do every day. And every day of his life, this little boy will insult you with his happiness and freedom. Because you don't have his hatred either."

Here is a man who has stood up and raised his head, with an alert and loving heart, "stronger than all the armies of the world," as he says. Our redemption draws near when we confront hate with the refusal to hate. Our redemption draws near when we raised a child into happiness and freedom as an insult to hate.

The writers of Scripture are telling us that the story of the world is not yet finished. It is a work in progress. Our times often look confusing and bleak. Yet, behind the scenes, God is at work— in individuals and in communities, in families and in churches, and maybe even in governments – to do away with injustice and to bring about a new world. If we stand up, we people entering Advent, and raise our heads, we might gaze through the lens of our scriptures into a world of hope and peace. Then we turn around with restored vision and look at what's already here. At the strides people have made through the centuries in the ways of justice and peace. And at the very long way we have to go. It is the beginning of a new year, a waiting time, a time to celebrate the already and the not-yet of Christ's loving light and power. Amen.