

December 1, 2013  
First Sunday in Advent  
Luke 21:25-36  
Things To Come  
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I apologize in advance for a somewhat disjointed sermon. I confess that I was totally distracted by my 8 month old granddaughter who is trying mightily to crawl but hasn't got there yet. Four adults have been encouraging her and that in itself has been quite funny. WE raise our voices as though she is running a marathon and she just looks at us like we are from another planet. She has no words but her looks are easily translated. "Leave me alone. I'll get it by myself."

I also have to tell you that through the years, I have tried to ignore this Lukan passage. It is frightening, particularly if you are young and have a vivid imagination. I first heard this passage on a Sunday at the 9:00 am Mass, the one that all the children were required to attend. The nuns patrolled the aisles and made sure that the rows of children did not squirm, giggle, pinch or whisper to one another during the Mass. It was a spiritually uplifting experience, I can assure you.

It must have been the first Sunday of Advent when this passage was read by the priest. I was terrified. I had a right to be frightened. This was the Cold War, after all. We were told that there were communists lurking everywhere, ready to foment rebellion and take away democracy and freedom of religion. And at any moment the BOMB might fall. So I was conditioned to be afraid.

One morning after hearing that passage, I woke up early and saw beyond my window the reddest sky I had ever seen. This, I thought, was it. It was the end of the world and Christ was coming to judge us. I was torn between running to my parents and hiding under the bed. I stayed where I was, watching in trepidation for the angels playing trumpets. When there were no heavenly brass bands and the colors of the sky became muted, it dawned on me that I was just seeing sunrise. With relief, I went back to bed, grateful that I hadn't gotten the whole household up.

Luke's Gospel was written between 50 and 60 years after Jesus. The people of that first century era had the same internal fears that I had about 60 years ago. They also had a right to be frightened. They lived in an earthquake zone. About 100 years before those words were written, a major earthquake destroyed a Roman city across the Sea of Galilee as well as some areas in Israel. Tales of that earthquake were passed down, I am certain, from generation to generation. Very recently, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and rebels were organizing to challenge the mighty Roman army. And there were many who saw in that rebellion a success and the re-emergence of the great kingdom of old with a successor to David sitting on the throne.

I had been afraid of a Communist take over. People throughout the Mediterranean world and up into what is now Germany and across the North Sea to England were under the rule of the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. Many of the Subject peoples accepted Roman rule and the cultural change. Others, notably England and Germany fought Roman armies in brutal warfare. Before the birth of Christ, Jewish rebels attempted their own war

and were decimated. The people hated and feared the power of the Roman troops and resented their presence. In hearing the words of Jesus, all those fears and the memories must have risen in their hearts. In hearing those words, did they wonder if there was safety anywhere.

Through the words of this passage, Advent shouts out a warning that the king is coming to judge the world just as Jesus told his followers to be on the lookout for what was to come. This Advent message is not the one we want to hear. We focus our spiritual selves on a hopeful, gentle time of waiting; the wait for the birth of a child in a stable. We may not even recognize how deeply we yearn for the fulfillment of those words that angels announced to shepherds: "Peace on Earth."

Our yearnings arise from the same reality around us that was in the minds and hearts of those who heard the words first. Headlines cry out the daily tragedies that leave us with compassion fatigue. The wars that bankrupt economies and souls have left untold numbers of men, women and children dead. Climate change that causes super storms in the Pacific, the flooding of New Orleans and parts of New York, the tornadoes that destroy life and livelihood in the Midwest and massive fires in the west leave us all waiting for what comes next while the worldwide body count increases beyond our ability to absorb the numbers. Is there any wonder why we yearn? Is there any wonder that we fear?

In the early centuries of Christianity, numbers of men and women began to reject all that was wrong with society and removed themselves from the greed, corruption and pain that was all around them. In wilderness areas they established monasteries where they could live in peace and seclusion. By their ascetic practices, they sought to conquer all the basic drives that define both the best and the worst in human nature and substitute those drives with a deeply rooted spirituality.

Throughout the years since those early monastic establishments, humans have sought that same escape from those same destructive elements of human society. The Reformation was, itself, instrumental in the formation of many such communities. Geneva was, for Calvin, the holy City. All who lived in Geneva were true and faithful followers of Calvinist Doctrine. Other names of communities that we recognize were the Puritans and the Pilgrims. The Puritans established Boston, the City on the Hill to be a light to the world. The Pilgrims were known as Separatists. They came to Plymouth to found the holy society that they envisioned. Today, a strong remnant of Reformation influence is found within the Amish and Mennonite communities. It is not only within the religious sphere that such establishments exist. From Israeli Kibbutz to co-housing to fraternal organizations to Taliban, there are people looking for the comfort and security of other like minded people.

We have seen the success and the failures of voluntary separation. Monastic communities became those proverbial dens of iniquity and needed to be reformed. Geneva and Boston arrested, tried and executed any who were non-conformists. Close-knit Amish families ostracize members who leave the community.

Peace on Earth. Peace in our communities. Peace in our homes. Peace in our hearts. This is what is at the heart of our yearnings just as the lack of it is at the heart of our fears. Perhaps the desire to get away from the pain and struggle is an individual solution but not the ultimate solution to realizing our common hope.

In our pride, our hubris, we humans have caused chaos and destruction in every age. We have been unable to let go of our fears and desires. We have lost our humility as we have created ever more dangerous toys and ultimately we are afraid of ourselves. The

Advent story gives us guidance; leading us along a four week reflection on the yearning, the hope for a divine miracle of indwelling, a proof that we have not been forgotten by God.

The culmination of the Advent story is not the final judgment or the end times. The culmination is the birth of that child in a stable. That child grew into the one who did not seek to hide from reality but to embrace it. That child grew into a speaker of truth to power. He did not run from pain or confrontation; rather, he faced down those who were responsible for injustice. His friends and followers were fishermen, a tax collector, women, foreigners, elected officials, soldiers, lepers, thieves. The only time that he withdrew was to gain energy and spiritual strength. He respected the law but would not hesitate to break it if a person was hungry or suffering.

There was no hiding behind real or imagined walls for Jesus. He lived within the complex reality that was and is daily life. In his response to human need and human actions, good and bad, he served as a model for all humanity. His teaching stories about a good Samaritan, a forgiving father, a farmer who gave all the laborers the same good wage are as timely today as they were 2000 years ago. Jesus healed. Jesus forgave. Jesus went to his execution calling on God to forgive those who had condemned him.

The innocent child in a manger is the living Christ who calls each of us to go and do likewise. We need not fear what is to come. We must not build walls against reality. Rather, we need to understand that we are all called to be healers in great and in small ways. It is our choice to act out our faith and hope and love as we respond to the chaos of life around us.

So, as we journey together through the weeks of Advent, let us put fear aside and find joy in small things like certain words of a carol or in the smile of a stranger or the kindness of a friend. Yes, things are increasingly frightening and we are unsettled in so many ways but Christ is with us and there is a God who cares.