

Title: Give Advent a Chance
Text: Luke 21: 25 - 36
Date: December 02, 2018

Two weeks ago the lectionary had me preach on Mark 13: 1 – 8, a passage that some scholars have referred to as a “mini-apocalypse.” Today’s lectionary reading from Luke 21 is another apocalyptic passage. Part of me thinks, “What gives? This is the first Sunday in Advent, and surely this is not what people came to hear. People want permission to ease into an Advent dripping with nostalgia, that culminates in a candlelight love-fest.”

I have to almost sheepishly confess that I have never preached on either of these passages before. Why is that? What have I been avoiding? I have come to the conclusion that I need to face what is in front of me – the unsought gift of the lectionary – and figure out why these apocalyptic passages are indeed relevant to us as we prepare our hearts for Christmas.

I mentioned before that apocalyptic literature is typically written in turbulent times, and that seems to be an apt description of the age in which we live. So many of the values we once held dear as a country seem to be at-risk. To make matters worse, some of the dark trends we see in our own country are apparently also replicating elsewhere around the globe.

I don’t mean to throw cold water on any of our childhood traditions, but maybe this year we might dare to explore entering into Advent in a way where our eyes remain open, as opposed to being a faith community that unconsciously encourages withdrawal from the world. In our rush to pet the adorable animals in the manger scene, might we try a new approach, and be open to the possibility that the season of Advent is more relevant to our turbulent times than we imagined?

As I was preparing to pitch this new perspective, I was surprised and heartened to discover this past week that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had preached on this same passage on the first Sunday of Advent in 1933. His sermon, entitled “Come, O Rescuer,” was framed around one verse, Luke 21: 28 which reads, *“Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

At this point in his career he was only 27, and had just begun his pastoral duties in two small German-speaking congregations in London. I was struck in particular by the turbulent historical context of his sermon. Adolf Hitler had been in power for almost a year at this point. The course of Nazi dominance over Germany’s political, economic, and social life had been launched with the following events:

- the burning of the Reichstag building in February, followed by curtailment of free speech and assembly;
- a one-day boycott of all Jewish businesses;
- the institution of the Gestapo secret police;
- the burning of books authored by non-Aryans;
- the banning of all political parties except the Nazis;
- the signing of the concordat between the Third Reich and the Vatican;
- the election of Ludwig Muller as national bishop of the Protestant church;
- the prohibition of pastors with Jewish ancestry from serving Protestant congregations;
- the formation of the Pastors’ Emergency Union;
- the November national elections that gave Hitler 92 percent of the vote.

Though he did not refer to any of these events specifically in his sermon, this was the backdrop of his theological reflection. It is critical that the Word be relevant even in such a context. There

is a call for our eyesight to be trained on something more grand and enduring than the turmoil of the day.

While I am not inclined to read his sermon to you, I do want to highlight a couple of passages that spoke to me. Bonhoeffer writes: **"This word is *not* addressed to all those who have become so accustomed to their condition that they no longer notice they are captives; people who have put up with their plight for all kinds of reasons and have become so apathetic that they are not provoked when someone calls out to them, "Your redemption is near." This Advent word is not meant for the well fed and satisfied, but for those who hunger and thirst. There is a knocking at their door, powerful and insistent."**

Do you hear that? The real fruit of Advent is not borne in complacency. There needs to be a restlessness. Bonhoeffer goes so far as to leave us with the image of a trapped miner waiting to be rescued.

He calls us to a different way of seeing. He writes, **"Something different than you see daily, something more important, something infinitely greater and more powerful is taking place. Become aware of it, be on guard, wait a short while longer, wait and something new will overtake you! God will come, Jesus will take possession of you and you will be a redeemed people!"**

Luke's unique focus on eschatological themes during Advent reminds us that, in the words of the rabbis, preparing for God's impending presence is a daily task. Though we may never see the final result, it is our minute-to-minute alertness that counts, and we must **"Be on guard!"** and **"Be alert at all times!"** (Luke 21:34, 36). In a real sense Judgment day is now, and we must respond now. Each day brings horrifying apocalypses for too many people around the globe, whether in Syria, El Salvador, or Myanmar.

Likewise, we all bear our own personal apocalypses—death, loss, illness, and addictions. How do we bring the good news to those who today suffer judgment after judgment, who plead for mercy, who ache to know the presence of the living God? Advent celebrations are hollow if they are about waiting passively. Instead we must **"bear fruits worthy of repentance,"** as Luke says. (Luke 3:8) As an Advent people, we always must be preparing for the incarnation, even and especially in the face of death and despair. We are called to stay vigilant because we know that God will come.

Advent is not a time to withdraw from the world. Advent is relevant to the real world, and calls us to enter the world, as we celebrate the God who entered and still enters the world.

It was exactly ten years after Bonhoeffer's sermon that the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann concluded his sermon on December 12, 1943, preached in Germany in the middle of the war. He writes: **"To be a Christian means to be one who waits for God's future. Hence for the Christian perhaps all seasons are essentially an Advent season. For Advent is characterized above all by this note of expectation... It is intended to remind us sharply of what we so easily and so often forget, namely, that as Christians we are expectant."** A certain line there caught my imagination: **"For the Christian perhaps all seasons are essentially an Advent season."** Could it be that as Christians we are called to live in a perpetual Advent?

Let's be honest. All apocalyptic literature is ultimately poetic literature. With that in mind William H. Lamar IV, pastor of the historic Metropolitan AME Church in D.C., calls us to essentially let apocalyptic literature do its thing. He writes, **"Let it challenge reason. Let it midwife questions of what is possible and what is impossible. Let it escort us to that lovely, liminal space where prose bows in humble adoration of the poetic. . . . Let's not torture a**

confession from the sun, moon, stars, and earth in Luke 21. Let the sea roar. Let the earth shake. Let the image of the coming Human One strengthen belief at a time of fainting hearts and equivocating faith. Listen to 1,000 sprouting fig trees declare that God's coming is as reliable as spring yielding to summer. Don't tie this strange, beautiful, apocalyptic imagery to a chair with the frayed rope of explanation. Let it be. Let it do. Poetry still works."

So with that ode to poetry, let me conclude with a poem that Steve Garnass-Holmes wrote as he found inspiration in today's text:

You have to know how to look
and where
among the distress of the nations,
the fear and foreboding,
to see the little fig leaves,
the subtle bursts of possibility,
God's faint but certain emergences,
the little gracelets that abound
and clue you in
on what is coming upon the world.
Look for the child who endures,
the woman who persists,
the beauty that subverts,
the love that sneaks in.
Watch for the free, outlandish life
that is not yet done arriving.
"That's just the way it is"
isn't the way it is.
Look till you see.
Dance till the music
can't help but start.
Don't miss a single birdsong.
You may have to silence yourself,
shed earbuds, turn off the TV,
and the one in your head.
The mercy that does not pass away
shows itself to those who are watching.
In the gray streets,
among the rows and columns,
the mystery keeps happening
and happening
and happening.

And please. Give Advent a chance this year. Be alert. This *is* relevant stuff.

Amen.

Luke 21:25-36

The Coming of the Son of Man

“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. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 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.

Exhortation to Watch

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”