

Things Are Not What They Seem
Luke 21:25-36; Jeremiah 33:14-16
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Advent week 1: our word is HOPE.

Walter Bruggemann, one of my favorite theologians says: “The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, (to) grieve in a society that practices denial, and (to) express hope in a society that lives in despair.”

That’s quite a menu of tasks. How is the church supposed to express hope and maintain perspective, when many of its individuals, people like you and me, may struggle so often to find it ourselves?

When things have looked bleak in the immediate moment, one way, shown by Jesus himself, was to zoom out, to turn and look at the bigger picture and use apocalyptic language, or language about the “end times.” African Americans used language about the end time frequently during slavery for example to give them hope amid great pain and suffering--*Soon and very soon, we are going to see the king...*

Apocalyptic language uses unimaginably large language to anticipate unimaginably important events. It’s the poetic speech of the oppressed and bruised straining toward hope. It declares God’s cosmic victory in the face of the evidence of God’s defeat.

Here in our text this morning, we get an example. We’re told incredible feats of nature will occur when that time comes: signs in the sun, moon and stars; roaring of the sea and waves, powers of the heavens shaking the earth, and confusion among the peoples, so much so, that they will faint. With the recent wildfires in California, and massive flooding from hurricanes and the 7.0 earthquake on Friday in Alaska, people might think the end times are here now! And in some pulpits around the country, you can bet they’re saying so.

For those of us living in the 21st century, it’s sometimes confusing to know what to do with texts like we read this morning, particularly as we experience our earth rumbling and writhing so violently.

And why all this emphasis on doom and gloom as we enter into a season when we anticipate the birth of Jesus/God in flesh/Emmanuel—God with us? It seems odd, don’t you think? What’s with all this foreboding and drama?

As Nate mentioned in his children’s message, we’re at the beginning of this new liturgical year. For the next 12 months, our texts will cycle through the Gospel of Luke. Luke (the author of Luke and Acts) is writing around 80 AD, ten years or so after the destruction of Jerusalem, when thousands of Jews were massacred and the Temple—the central and holiest point of reference to God’s presence—was burned and destroyed by the Romans. By this time, the people of God were straining toward hope again. The people lived in the reality of devastating war, massacres and governmental power struggles and were looking to the promises God had made of restoration, like what we see in Jeremiah. They needed to believe in the hidden victory of God who would intervene and bring a fresh perspective to their suffering.

By the time Luke writes, however, his audience is comprised of Jesus followers, and this book might even have been designed to read to followers sitting around a table ready to share the Lord’s Supper, just as we will this morning.

Here's a warning, though. For people like us who have a good amount of privilege, Luke's Gospel is not always easy to hear and read, because it challenges us in our comfort and advantage. But it is also anything but predictable. In our readings, we will see that not all the tax collectors in Luke, for example, are exemplary, and not all of them are wicked. Not all of the wealthy and powerful characters are scoundrels, and not everyone who receives Jesus' help is noticeably virtuous. The ones who show concern for others and a willingness to surrender power find themselves praised or included. This Gospel should frustrate anyone who wants it to be a predictable narrative to prop up respectable or cautious religion. Instead, we are challenged at every turn, beginning in this passage, to anticipate divine interaction in the way things are...to be surprised with wonder, awe and grace.

Hope can be a tricky proposition, however. "Hope does not mean much when we are comfortable, satisfied, safe, warm, and fed. In fact, we are often likely to feel there is no need for hope. Hope was, after all, made for times of disaster and difficulty. When we are too comfortable, we are more likely to fall to sleep than to hope. Comfort dulls our senses. It may push us to ignore the warning signs that the soil of our lives has become too water-logged to hold on any longer to the mountain slopes of life." (Christopher Harbin, *Awake to Life*)

In our first Lukan text this Advent, we are urged to wait and watch. Things aren't necessarily as they seem. We are asked to: Trust that God is near and is at work in our individual and our corporate lives; Trust that God is breaking through at the right moments-- Even when family troubles mount, even when there are difficulties at work, even when financial worries seem unsurmountable; even when health issues overwhelm, even when the power clamoring in local, national or global government dealings, the message here at Advent is to look at the bigger picture both personally and together as a community—and HOPE, because God is near.

But that's not the only thing. We are invited to participate. "Amid the destruction and devastation that are ever taking place in the world, Christ beckons us to perceive and to participate in the ways that he is already seeking to bring redemption and healing for the whole of creation." (Jan Richardson) Our task is to discern how we might be a part of bringing that redemption and healing for others.

Where is God showing up for you, for me right now? Where do you need hope? Is your concept of God big enough to imagine a different outcome/an inbreaking of the Spirit? Are you awake enough to see it?

Amid the worst things one can imagine, God breaks in to our present and brings healing and redemption.

I found a short story by Raymond Carver called, ***A Small, Good Thing***. A boy's eighth birthday approaches, and his mother goes to order a cake. But the morning of his birthday, the boy is hit by a car, knocked unconscious, and rushed to the hospital. He lies there in the intensive care unit, closely watched, given all of the support modern medicine can offer. The doctor is hopeful the boy will soon regain consciousness. He virtually promises the parents that such will be the case. They believe him, feel optimistic, spend their time waiting, anxiously, of course, but expecting a favorable turn. But time passes, and the parents begin to hope against hope—joining all the ranks of those who've paced hospital corridors, who've sat through long nights, sleepless and full of foreboding. Occasionally, one or the other parent dashes home briefly, to shower, to change clothes, and just to catch just the merest glimpse of an earlier, once routine life.

On one of those visits home, the phone rings. The husband answers—hears about a cake, but knows nothing about it. It doesn't register with him. It was his wife who ordered it. Then the wife gets a couple of calls, which seem to her at the time to be inscrutable, and then sadistic. She's on the edge when the phone rings because she's been waiting in fear for that call from the hospital. She asks if the call is about her boy, and she's told "yes." The caller, a man, asks if she'd "forgotten about Scotty," her son.

In a tragic turn of events, the boy dies. The parents go through the last hell of such a hospital event. When they go home, again comes a phone call, 'Your Scotty, I've got him ready for you,' the man's voice said. 'Did you forget him?' The parents are enraged. They regard themselves as victims of a moral monster. Another call, and then silence: torment—but in a flash, the wife finally realizes who the caller is. So, she and her husband, in the middle of the night, filled with anger that only profound grief can create, go to the shopping mall, where the baker is alone preparing for the next day.

What follows is a scene of unforgettable poignancy and power. ***The couple's anger at the baker turns to acknowledgement of suffering and tragedy.*** The baker gets them to be with him, to accept his rolls and coffee, to receive from him the "small, good thing" of bread.

The light of his shop penetrates the darkness. The mother and father stay. They talk and they eat. It's a time of communication and communion. The author, Robert Carver, takes us in his own fashion back to the literal meaning of 'cum panis' with bread. (c.f. Cathedral: Raymond Carter: Vintage, 1989, p59ef.)

God breaking into this situation through the breaking of bread and hearing of one another's troubles and sorrows. It's holy and it's good.

The Christian life never promises us that we will be free from pain and tragedy. But what we celebrate at Advent is the coming of one who breaks into the midst of the incredible joys as well as the extreme sorrows and offers us hope...hope that we are never alone, hope that there is something more, hope that redemption can and will occur.

Watch, wait and do your part in bringing it to be.

Amen.