

Wait. What?

Luke 21:29-36

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Perhaps you've heard of the mouse that was scrounging around on the streets of L.A. looking for food. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a cat about to pounce so quickly he darted to the side and began to run for his life. The cat was right on his tail. Quickly, he ran around a corner and saw a manhole in the street. There was just enough room in that manhole to jump in. The mouse landed on a ledge just out of the cat's reach. The cat stuck his paw into the hole and could feel the mouse but couldn't reach him. Then the mouse heard "ruff, ruff, ruff," and the pitter-patter of the cat's paws on the pavement running away. When the mouse stuck his head out of the manhole to see if the coast was clear, the cat grabbed him. The mouse turned to the cat and said, "I know I'm a gonner but how did you do that?" The cat replied, "If you're gonna live in LA, you have to be bilingual!"

Advent is the season when the church holds its breath in anticipation and expectation of the fresh coming of God into the world. The church's calendar is not simply marked by the arrival of the Christmas season, but marked by expectancy and preparation for the in-breaking of God, for the fulfillment of God's promises. This morning we lit the candle of "Hope" – it will take a fresh in-breaking of the Lord to address the challenges in our world and in our lives. Followers of Christ have to learn a new language: the language of hope. If you're going to live the Christian life, you have to become bilingual. We all know the language of our culture but do we know the language of faith?

We must awaken from our slumber and numbness, according to this text. Our cloudy vision of the future is not enough. Cynicism about our current situation is not enough. God is coming. God is coming either for us, or to grab us, to redeem us, or to judge us – but God is coming. "Pray," says Jesus, "that you'll be able to either escape or to stand before the Son of Man when he comes."

Apocalyptic language like that used in our text today is a strange language all together. Apocalypse means literally “revelation.” Unimaginably large language is used to anticipate unimaginably important events. The first coming of Jesus in Bethlehem is tied to his second coming but it is more acknowledged than understood.

“Wait, what?” Have you heard this expression lately? According to the Urban Dictionary, this is the “mantra of the attention deficit disorder.” Literally it means, “Stop talking and start over.” “Wait, what did he just say?” It’s a phrase used “. . . to back the conversation up when you realize you weren’t listening.” There is a book by that title. When something isn’t right or expected, you may hear the expression “Wait! What?” The apocalyptic language of our text and the future envisioned of the impending kingdom of God is so foreign that we have to use a different language to understand it. The disciples must have expressed a first century equivalent of “Wait, what?”

Things are not necessarily what they appear to be. To look only at things that seem to be close at hand is to miss the larger picture. Wake up. Be alert. Be on your guard. “Your redemption is drawing near!”

People can’t help wondering about the end of the world as we know it. Predictions of global warming and concerns about rogue nations with nuclear arms are simply contemporary versions. It’s not wrong to wonder about the meaning of events and see in them indications of God’s presence in life. At the time of Luke’s writing, it was the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans that set them to wondering about current events and how it might fulfill God’s plan for redemption. Recent fires in California witnessed many fleeing for their lives. Many said it all felt like the end of the world, an apocalypse.

Between the Lord’s first coming in Bethlehem and his final coming, the Lord is continually invading our lives in ways large and small. We tend to think God is trying to preserve the world so it strikes us as odd that here God is bringing an end to the world. As for the end, well, it’s kind of like hearing of a tornado or hurricane warning. The storm has not been sighted but the weather conditions are judged to be conducive to such a sighting. Still, I don’t know what to do with this strange language, with words like these. I dare not explain, adjust, or apply them. Maybe I shouldn’t do anything with them, but just let them say something to us. When this kind

of an event happens, you don't have to worry about missing it. Everyone will recognize it.

Some years ago our daughter and her husband bought their first home in North Carolina. The closing date was set and they drove from Washington DC to Raleigh, North Carolina to sign the papers, but it was just as a hurricane was bearing down on the eastern coast. I encouraged them to postpone the closing, and if the house was still standing after the hurricane, then sign the papers. But they were anxious and excited so they drove down, signed the papers and then surprisingly tried to drive back to Washington DC in the hurricane. They somehow concluded that, though the rest of the nation was bracing for a disaster, it wouldn't affect them. Well, it did affect them. They drove into Virginia and were almost blown off the road. Every hotel room was filled. They sat in a parking lot in their car without food or water, finally having to turn around and go back to North Carolina. They found one fast food restaurant open. Certain events affect everyone and everyone will recognize the events being described here by Jesus. Thankfully our kids safely returned to their new home, where it was still standing.

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Chaos that accompanies cosmic change gets interpreted as indications of redemption. A lot of people get uncomfortable with this kind of talk. People who run businesses, who work in universities, and for the armed forces, really anyone who profits from the status quo, begins twitching when they hear talk like this. Chaos is to be resisted. However, other people, who have little to gain from preserving what is, kind of tremble with delight when they hear talk like this.

Young people are probably more drawn to language like this because it makes their parents uncomfortable and they may perceive the system as rigged, unfair, and broken, in need of redemption anyway. They usually don't have as much to lose.

Christian hope is envisioned in the midst of present adversity by those who catch a glimpse of what, by faith, can yet happen. It is not based upon possibilities inherent in the situation. It is based upon the promise of God. According to the New Testament Book of Hebrews: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen . . .”¹ Hope believes that a new beginning will emerge by God's faithfulness, even in the midst of whatever mess we happen

¹ Hebrews 11:1

to be in. It is the belief that even in this God-forsaken situation, a new beginning will emerge. So we must continue to live faithfully through adversity and trust in the Lord.

A man and his family lived down the block from a church. The house was a mess and so was the yard. The children were poorly cared for. Rumors were that he drank heavily, abused his wife and children. People in the little Methodist church decided to help them. The preacher came to his house. Some from the youth group invited the kids to join them on a trip to the mountains. The woman's group asked her to join them for an annual prayer meeting. And the man and his family came to church for a few Sundays. Then they quit. That was the last they heard of him until a few months later when the preacher met him on the street. He didn't recognize him at first. "Joe, is that you!?" he asked. "Yea, it's me," he said with a smile. "At least, it's mostly me. I've changed." Well anyone could see it. He looked great and so did his house and yard. What had happened?

He told the preacher a few weeks ago a group had come to pray with him after they heard he'd been a drunk. A church group, but not from the nice little Methodist church down the block. These were fire-breathing fundamentalists. They came from across the tracks, washed in the blood Baptist Church. They told him if he didn't stop drinking and beating his wife, he was going to die, and burn in hell forever. They told him God was coming to get him and God was mad. I mean, they got his attention. They got him to their church where they prayed for him by name and asked God to let him live just a little longer, till they could get him saved. Well, they got him turned around, inside out and upside down. Redeemed!

The Methodist preacher said, "I'm sorry our church couldn't meet your needs, but I'm happy their church has." "Preacher," he said. "Don't feel bad. Your church gave me aspirin. I needed massive chemo-therapy." Sometimes you need more than nice images and language. Unimaginably large language is used to anticipate unimaginably important events.

Today we gather with Jesus for a meal, a nice meal – just Jesus and his friends. A little food, a little polite conversation. And when we're all settled at the table, Jesus says, "That cup – it's my blood. This bread, my body broken into pieces for you." So if we are to be redeemed, if God comes to redeem us, redemption will not be cheap.

Who can straighten out this mess that our world has become? We dare not be naïve about the world. It is a broken, twisted, and sometimes, violent place. Faith understands that. Our hope is not based on the way the world is but what, by God's grace, it will become. The Church points to her Lord with hope and confidence that a new beginning will emerge because of God's faithfulness. "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Amen