

*An ADVENTure of Hope*

November 29, 2015 Advent 1C Luke 21:25-36, Jeremiah 33:14-16

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Such a lovely baby shower invitation, isn't it? I'm speaking of course, of our second reading today, this warm and cozy text from Luke. After all, we all came this morning stuffed with the harvest feast, as my kids were calling Thanksgiving. And we all know what comes right after the harvest feast....that season of Christmas, the birth of the baby. The trees are up all over my neighborhood, the stores have been blasting Christmas music all week long, folks lined up early in the mad dash that has come to be known as Black Friday. Indeed, it is the Christmas season.

Or so we thought. What's up with this doom and gloom of a scripture reading from Luke? Where are the shepherds on the hills, the angels in the starry sky? And what's with this adult doomsayer Jesus? He's not supposed to even be born yet, right? We came today expecting to hear the news of his birth that is to come. Expecting to find a baby shower invitation covered with manger scenes, choruses of angels, surprised shepherds, and a pensive mother-to-be pondering all of this news in her heart.

Ah, Advent in the church. Every year if we are paying attention, we have this whiplash sort of experience, this twilight zone sort of life, where the events and goings on outside these walls are in complete conflict with what is going on INSIDE these walls. But when I think of it that way, I realize that the church has always been, and is always called to be, counter cultural. We are NOT of this world, as scripture reminds us in many places.

So while Christmas seems to have taken over the secular world, the church world, which after all is the origination of Christmas, is keeping Christmas, just keeping it where it belongs in our hearts and in our experience. And there is good reason for that. We must prepare for Christmas. And by that I don't mean buy all the gifts, wrap them, bake the cookies, mail the cards, decorate the house (inside and out), answer all the party invitations, plan the menus, and shop shop shop. No, you see that is preparation all right, but that is preparation for the secular holiday that Christmas has become. And its lots of fun, and its something everyone, religious or not, seems to love.

But Christmas, the real deal Christmas, needs an entirely different kind of preparation. In the real deal Christmas, in the one that really DOES put Christ back into Christmas, as folks love to quip these days, we need to prepare our hearts. And preparing hearts is an entirely different matter. Preparing hearts is preparing for a holy day not a holiday. When my children were young, and the secular Christmas was so important, I was so grateful that the church kept real Christmas where it belonged, and in the midst of this crazy secular Christmas, the church gave me the gift of Advent. Advent was a sanctuary from the overkill and over abundance that was going on around me. Advent provided the quiet escapes and the slowing down that allowed me to then enjoy the rest of it all better. Advent was the safe quiet place to catch my breath, to refocus, to keep in mind that Christmas would come, whether I was 'ready' or not.

And that is the focus of our readings today as well. The idea that Christ will come, as a baby, or in the second coming, whether we are ready or not. God is not in the habit of sending out save the date announcements. Abraham had absolutely no idea that God would show up one day and say 'pack up and move on, for I have plans for you.' Likewise, Jacob, heading towards a show down with his estranged brother, had no idea God would show up and wrestle the night

away with him. Who needed that distraction in the midst of this tenuous family reunion? Moses certainly didn't get an Outlook email initiation to meet God at the top of Mt. Sinai for an important communication. And there was no inauguration invitation for David as he took the kingship of Israel, hiding in the mountain side. No, God likes to show up unannounced. It's a favorite tactic of God's

At the same time, God likes to make promises and keep them. So while we don't get a forewarning of when the messiah will come, we get the PROMISE of a messiah. Our reading from Jeremiah this morning echoes that promise. "The days are surely coming, when I will fulfill the promise I made" says the Lord. "Jerusalem will live in safety" the promise continues. The days may surely be coming, but only God knows WHICH day.

Jesus gets a bit more dramatic. To get his listeners attention, he describes scenes straight out of some of our modern movies and books. The sky is literally falling. The seas roar with waves bigger and more powerful than anyone has ever seen. People are fainting in the streets. The heavens shake. I'm pretty sure this text has been the inspiration for more than one Hollywood screenplay! The thing is, as human beings, we get caught up in all the dramatic and spectacular imagery. We miss the really important words of Jesus in this text. Despite what might go on in the world around us, he tells us to 'stand up, raise your heads'....in other words, don't get distracted by the events around you, instead, keep your eyes and mind focused on God. Look up! Don't fall apart, he says. Look for me. Always.

Why? Because life as we know it will not always be the same, indeed most of us know that life changes daily, and can be altered beyond recognition in a matter of seconds. A job is lost, a loved one dies, a terminal diagnosis is received. Life as it was yesterday is but a memory. But while all that may be true, while heaven and earth as we know it will someday pass away, Jesus assures us 'my words will not pass away.' I am the constant, he tells us. I am the one you can count on, now, tomorrow, and even at the end of time, whenever that will be.

This my friends is not a text of fear and foreboding. It is NOT a warning about what might happen to us in the end-times. No! It is quite the opposite. This is a text of HOPE. This is a great adventure of hope and trust. The emphasis of this text is NOT on when these things will happen, as too many publishing houses and crack pots want you to believe. NO! The emphasis of this text is how to live, how to live in God's promise that never fails, how to live today. Because God keeps all promises, we can live without fear, no matter what happens. No matter if these crazy images Jesus describes actually happened in reality.

The thing is, we know the end of the story. Our God loves us so much, that we are not kept in suspense. We are told from the beginning, that in God's love, all will one day be well. In God's love, all suffering will one day end. In God's love, all of the cosmos, the world, will be redeemed and set right. And because God has told us the end of the story, we can live in the middle of the story without fear. We can live in the in-between times with our heads raised and our eyes lifted above the wretched craziness of this world.

Now, that does not mean we ignore what is going on here. It does not mean we go around with our heads in the clouds, denying the suffering and pain that happens on this earth. What it does mean is that we can deal with all those situations without fear. And when we operate without fear, we are so much more alive, available to the people and needs around us. We are not

consumed with fear, we are not caught in the spiral of doubt and confusion that clouds our minds, we are not distracted from the things that really matter.

When I was a child I always looked forward to the annual television broadcast of The Wizard of Oz. Now, those flying monkeys would have me flying out of the room in fear the first few times I saw the film. But eventually I realized, like I'm sure you did too, that I knew the end of the story. I realized I knew that all would be well in the end. I realized that I knew Dorothy would make it back to Kansas and evil would be destroyed. And when I realized that, I was able to watch that movie every year without flying out of the room in terror. I was able to notice and pick up details that my fear used to prevent me from seeing. I was able to relax into the story and appreciate it for its entirety, not just scene by scene. I never tired of watching it. Knowing the end didn't keep me from wanting to experience it. It was just that I was able to experience in a whole new way.

So it is with our story with God. We have hope because we know the end of the story. We don't live in fear, because we keep our heads raised and our eyes on God. And without fear, we are able to experience all of this world; the gifts it brings as well as the pain it brings. Because we have hope, we can walk with others in their darkness. Because we have hope, we don't throw in the towel and give up on situations that seem beyond our control. Because we have hope, we get up each day and raise our heads and look for the miracles and gifts that are always present, even in the darkest of times. Because of God's promise, we are able to live in the reality of this world, without fear, without losing hope.

So again, 'why can't the church just get on to Christmas, already?' you might ask. Because the preparation our hearts need to take in the enormity of the promise, is very different than the preparation the shopping malls need. Because the gift of Christ, of Christmas, is life changing, and it holds the promise of the great arrival of the full kingdom one day. How do we prepare for this Christmas? for the holy day, not the holiday? By continuing to put our hope in God daily, no matter the circumstances surrounding us. Even if the sky should fall, and the seas roar, and people faint in the streets, while we run to help them, we keep our eyes fixed on God. Indeed, we are entering a great ADVENTure of hope! Amen.