

Draw Near
Luke 21.25-36
Advent 1C
November 29, 2015
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

We're beginning a new church year today—Year C, Advent 1—and we're beginning at the end. It's only been a week since we were gathered right here, but everything is different. Even in one week's time, the sun is setting that much earlier, the decorations of the Christmas season are officially all around us, most of us have eaten too much for too many days in a row, and many of us have watched too many news reports for too many hours for too many days.

On Friday, my family stopped in Biloxi for a quick bite to eat before returning to New Orleans from Mobile. One of my children was seated facing a ceiling-mounted TV with a 24-hour news network covering the unconfirmed details of Friday's shooting in Colorado. Before any details at all had been confirmed, the cameras were rolling and incomplete theories were being provided by people whose training is not in police work. Yet those same, untrained people blather on to fill the hours until there is actually news to report. Meanwhile, on the news crawl were half-statements about ISIS beneath the flashing blue lights and conjecturing reporters on the screen.

I realized after a moment that my child was unable to look away and was also becoming afraid of what was on the screen. Across the room, the TV in my line of sight was a sports channel with bad news only for fans of losing teams. I offered to switch seats, and the mood at our table shifted immediately. No longer faced with the terrifying images of a scene now too common, the only thing to see was quesadillas and family and basketball. Sometimes a shift in perspective is a life-changing thing.

This is not to say we ignore the world's realities, but whatever focus has our primary attention is what we begin to manifest in our lives. If we are swept into fear and panic and feed those parts of ourselves throughout each day, then terror and paralysis is all we breed in our lives. If the bad news of the world is in our consciousness but not shaping our consciousness, if we temper the input of hard news with activities and relationships that offer hope and love and grace, then maybe we stand a shot of actually living lives that take down terror. Living with constant fear in our eyes will not bring about the kingdom of God; it will just beget more fear. And so we dive right into this first Sunday of Advent with Jesus saying these very things to his disciples.

“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified”

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with...the worries of this life”

“when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

One of my favorite statements about our stories of faith comes from the great Franciscan, Richard Rohr, “The only language religion is capable of is metaphor.” To face this dark Gospel lesson today with any hope of understanding what Jesus’ words might mean, we have to first know the language of metaphor.

For generations, we have read and studied poetic images in scripture of the beginning of all things:

In the beginning when God created[a] the heavens and the earth, **2** the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. **3** Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. **4** And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

and the end of all things:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. **2** And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

In the reading of these texts is an invitation, and the invitation is not to learn a science lesson about how the sky functions or to memorize the signs to watch for Christ's triumphant return in the clouds. The invitation is to hear, through the limitations of written word, that God is Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. Our lives are divinely breathed into being, and the Source of all things whispers to us with promises that everything will continually be made new.

Think of it this way: as very young people we read the poetry of love...
"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate."

"O my Luve is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
O my Luve is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune."

But only once we knew love did we understand what the poets were trying to get at. The metaphor of beginnings and endings is trying to get at the question of Source. From where did we all originate? And toward what are we all returning?

Poet Michael Coffey responds to today's Gospel reading not with exhaustive commentary and analysis of apocalyptic literature but with a poem.¹

You said meet you by the fig tree
and the leaves would heal us
and the branches flower and fruit and feed

you said God would appear as sure as spring
and something wonderful that has no human words,
maybe only exhalations, was coming, and soon, and how

we waited by the tree, observed fruit emerging,
heard it plunk to the ground, smelled sweet softened flesh
watched chipmunks and marmosets scurry off with it all

now the leaves brown and pirouette to the ground

¹ <http://www.ocotillopub.org/2012/11/you-said-meet-you-by-fig-tree.html>

and the branches look like weapons and the wind blows
through us and we are naked in our waiting in our weakened faith

“Be on guard, let not your hearts be weighed down
with dissipation and drunkenness and worry.” Surely you jest.
gravity pulls and tugs and we do droop and drink and dissolve

O Lord, yes you—the one who said to meet you there
the one who withered on the tree like wasted produce
who rose too soon because where are you now—our longing for you aches

so why do we gather still and so, watching twigs sprout and bud
spying every last *ficus carica*, eavesdropping to hear if you will curse it
or finally flower all hopes and dreams now shriveled on the branch

These images speak to the horror of reality and the great hope of making all things right again. The past two weeks of news reports have not been good. Violence abounds, and it's not all at the hands of ISIS. While one group is convinced their Islamist ideology will be embraced through force and fear, there are Christian zealots in this country who believe their message in the sanctity of life must be protected by similar acts of violence. And in between there is rage and ignorance and limited worldview and even more limited opportunities. From the Ninth Ward to Biloxi to Colorado Springs to Syria, there is plenty to fear.

And so, together, we step into this first day of Advent in great darkness holding tenderly to Jesus' words, “do not be terrified...do not be weighed down with the worries of this life.” Our year begins in darkness with the story of the violent end of all things. And neither the darkness nor the violence is the end; they are both the very beginning.

With the prophet Isaiah, we proclaim, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”² We don't have all the answers, but we have the hope that the light is coming, the light that overcomes darkness, the light that is the light of the world. And we gather here because we hold onto that hope even in the face of fear and terror and exhaustion. And somehow, as though God planned this very thing, when we gather together with our shreds of hope, when we whisper to each other in the dark, “Do not be afraid,” the light shines in the darkness and begins to grow around us.

² Isaiah 9.2

When we are afraid WWII is about to break out, when we are afraid that the stranger in our midst may be an enemy, when we are filled with contradictions about which lives matter more than others, and which lives deserve to be saved while others are taken, it is “[precisely in this context], pastor and writer David Lose proclaims, “our communities can be places of light and hope, courage and confidence that welcome all those struggling with fear and darkness. We can remind [each other and the world], in the words that come at the end of this season, that the light of Christ shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. We can, in other words, when we begin to grow afraid, bid each other again and again to stand up and raise our heads, confident that our redemption draws near.”³

It’s at this point that I would usually say “May it be so. Amen,” and sit down. But a very full November meant we shifted our pledge Sunday to the final Sunday of this month, also the first Sunday of Advent. Initially, I thought this to be very awkward and wasn’t quite certain the two could intersect in any meaningful way. Yet as I wrote and thought about the unique voice and presence we have to offer the world when the days are dark and the news is hard, well, that is something worth making a pledge of one’s life. Our vows to each other are surely beacons of light amidst great darkness.

As we sing our final hymn this morning, I invite you to walk forward at any point throughout the hymn and leave your pledge card on the communion table. It’s at this table that we remember who we were created to be, we confess how we have fallen short, and we are renewed for the living of our days. Here we draw near to one another and to God as we aspire to live and love in the Way of Jesus. Today we pledge ourselves, in time and energy and creativity and financial resources, to be people of light in the darkness as the community of faith at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church.

Let us stand and sing as we make our way into this new year together.

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/>