

So This is Advent
December 2, 2018
First Sunday of Advent
Scripture Meditation on Luke 21.25-36
(Baptism of Julia Lott, Communion)

Somehow I briefly forget each and every year that Advent starts with apocalyptic literature. Each and every year I am either so distracted by all there is to do in this season or captivated by the romance of twinkle lights and favorite movies and singing along to corny Christmas music in the car that I am taken completely by surprise when I open the readings for Advent 1. It's like a shocking splash of cold water to the face.

Why apocalypse and what are we supposed to do with this? These are our questions today. For a couple of years now, I have come back to an old favorite song by David Wilcox. I went through a major David Wilcox phase in the 1990s—memorized most of his songs, saw him live a half dozen times. I have no idea where any of those old CDs are, but this song has played in my mind at various frightening points over the past couple of years.

You say you see no hope, you say you see no reason
We should dream that the world would ever change
You're saying love is foolish to believe
'Cause there'll always be some crazy with an Army or a Knife
To wake you from your day dream, put the fear back in your life...

Look, if someone wrote a play just to glorify
What's stronger than hate, would they not arrange the stage
To look as if the hero came too late he's almost in defeat
It's looking like the Evil side will win, so on the Edge
Of every seat, from the moment that the whole thing begins
It is...

Love who makes the mortar
And it's love who stacked these stones
And it's love who made the stage here
Although it looks like we're alone
In this scene set in shadows
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play...

For in this darkness love can show the way

On this first Sunday of a new church year, we start with a question of story within this question of apocalypse. What's the real story of our lives? There's the story we can see unfold around us, and my goodness can we hear that story even better than Jesus' audience would have heard it. We with computers attached to phones and in our hands almost all the time. We with the 24 hour news cycle. We with the ability to watch starvation and disease and war on our screens like it's all just another tv show. We know a story that could send us into a bunker to hide and fully disengage from life.

Jesus' disciples were living within a very real story of oppression and fear around them, and it was quite enough to look into the face of Empire and those who conspired with Empire and want to throw in the towel. So when Jesus talks about signs in the sun, the moon, the stars, and on the earth, he's telling them they cannot hide from their lives because of this one story they know. He's telling them there's a better story, a truer story, a story guided by love, and they might have to listen for it in unexpected places.

³⁴"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly,
³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.
³⁶Be 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."

Those words don't sound very hopeful on their own, on this Sunday we have marked with Hope. But these words from Jesus are an invitation into a better story. He is calling his audience to wake up and be fully alive. If you are numbing your fear with booze and distraction and an overly full calendar and entirely too much time in front of a screen, you are missing everything. Be on guard, be alert, be here, Jesus practically begs them. Sometimes we'd rather be anywhere than the "here" of our lives.

Brene Brown has written extensively about numbing in her research on shame and vulnerability, and she reminds us, "We cannot selectively numb emotions, when we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions."¹ "You can't numb those hard feelings without numbing the other affects, our emotions. You cannot selectively numb. So when we numb those, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness."²

¹ Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*

² Brene Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*

In the next chapter in Luke's gospel, Jesus is in a garden praying and asks that his disciples stay there and pray with him. He's afraid. In fact, he's asking God to let the cup pass from him. He's staring into the darkness and facing it. And he turns to his disciples for support, and they've gone to sleep. Jesus calls out to them to wake up. Wake up! Come stand here and face the darkness with me. Look at it. See it for what it is. Light can't shine in the darkness if light has covered up and gone to sleep. Light shining takes courage.

It's like this, Jan Richardson writes, "Advent reminds us, year in and year out, that although we are to keep a weather eye out for cosmic signs, we must, like the fig tree that Jesus evokes in this passage, be rooted in the life of the earth. And in the rhythm of our daily lives here on earth, Christ bids us to practice the apocalypse. He calls us in each day and moment to do the things that will stir up our courage and keep us grounded in God, not only that we may perceive Christ when he comes, but also that we may recognize him even now. There is a sense, after all, in which we as Christians live the apocalypse on a daily basis. 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."³ Christ calls us to wake up.

Jesus invites us to believe in a better story; a story written, built, established by love. In this wild invitation to watch the sun, the moon, the stars, and the earth itself for signs, we're invited into a story of hope that implores us to be right here, right now. A story that requires we be fully awake to our lives and fully awake to our world. A story that implores us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. A story that tells us we can stare into fear without pushing the fear away. A story that tells us we are being woven together in a a tapestry of love, so stay awake, be courageous, and be part of the mystery of what is happening.

Welcome to the season of Advent.

³ <http://adventdoor.com/2009/11/23/advent-1-practicing-the-apocalypse/>