

Embracing Hope

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

Mark Schloneger

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The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

(Jeremiah 33:14-16, NRSV)

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be 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." (Luke 21:25-36, NRSV)

Early in our marriage, before children,

Sarah and I went to see *Titanic*,
a movie that was breaking all kinds of box records
and would go on to win all kinds of awards.

And before I say more, let me just say this.

Titanic was a fine movie.

It was worth the price of admission.

I was entertained, but . . . (you knew that was coming, didn't you?).

But I just wasn't feeling it, you know?

It's not that I can't get emotionally invested in movies – I can --

the Disney film *Coco* tore me apart,
but *Titanic*? Not so much.

It was a long movie, and the longer I watched,

the more I was getting irritated by all the narrow escapes,
all the near misses, all the tender kisses.
all the cheap ploys to manipulate my emotions,
and I wasn't having it.

So I leaned over to Sarah, my wife, and I was going to whisper
something like, "Give me a break."

But I stopped myself,
because she was crying --
in fact, she was having trouble keeping herself together.

I remember this moment.

I remember it because I remember looking at her,
in that dark theater, and feeling completely mystified.

This woman I married, the person sitting right next to me,
the one that I knew so well – or so I thought,
she was responding to the same story as me
in a completely opposite way.

Even now, it's quite befuddling.

But the truth is that it happens all the time,
not just between Sarah and me,
but for all of us.

Our cultures, our social locations, our experiences, our personalities,
all influence how we interpret events, stories,
and information that we call "facts."

That's why we can be looking at the same things,
and make different conclusions, find different meanings,
respond in different ways.

I suspect we do that with the scripture we have before us this morning.

To some, Jesus' words about the end of the world are heavy, foreboding, distressing.
They inspire fear, dread, and worry.

To others, though, hearing these words inspire hope, that the present darkness will not last,
that justice will finally prevail, that love will abound.

How you receive these words says a lot about your social location, I think.

It's the first Sunday of Advent, and that means that Christmas is coming.

For many people, these four weeks are some of the most stressful weeks of the year.

Christmas shopping, Christmas cards, Christmas candy,
Christmas parties, Christmas feasts, Christmas travel,
Christmas letters, Christmas concerts, Christmas cookies.

Christmas – even the word Christmas -- brings stress,
a reminder of how many days you have left
to get all that you want to get done before the big day.

You wish weeks had more days,

and the days had more hours.
Advent is here, and the day is coming.

For other people, these four weeks are some of the most painful weeks of the year.
The traditions, the parties, the letters, the family gatherings,
they drive home the point, over and over and over,
that Christmas is coming, but those you love are not.

Or maybe it's the opposite.

Christmas is coming, and so are those people who have hurt you the most.

Christmas is coming,

and so are those feelings of regret, worthlessness, and loneliness.

You wish these weeks would accelerate

and these days would blur into January.

Advent is here, and the day is coming.

No matter whether we want those weeks to slow down or speed up,
we have to ask ourselves these questions:

What day is coming? Whose arrival are we expecting?

The days are coming, Jesus said,

when the sky and the earth and the sea

will be filled with signs of terror, death, and destruction.

The nations will be confused.

People will be filled with fear and foreboding at what is coming in the world.

Now, most scholars understand that Jesus was talking about
the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Luke's readers would have seen this occur.

They would have been living in days of chaos and confusion.

The destruction of the temple, the sacking of Jerusalem

were a previously unimaginable catastrophe that, to Jews, shook the heavens.

But can you read these words and not think of current events?

The days are coming, Jesus said.

Christ have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Not too long ago, I saw a photo of a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan.

It was taken from an airplane or helicopter.

From the left to the right, from the top to the bottom,

all I could see were tents and makeshift homes packed tightly together on dusty earth.

From hundreds of feet in the air,

the whole place seemed God-forsaken,

colored with different shades of light brown,

dust on the ground, dust on the tent tops.

If you didn't know any better,

you would think that nothing was living on this land,

that nothing was moving.
But this photo was taken with such a sophisticated camera
that you could zoom in for a closer look.
And you could see people there.
Meeting, talking, working,
standing on the dusty paths, living in the dusty tents.
The days are coming, Jesus said.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Just last Sunday, six people were killed and over sixty injured when an SUV
drove into a holiday parade in Waukesha, Wisconsin.
The days are coming, Jesus said.
Christ have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Just this past week,
Omicron, a new variant of COVID-19, was discovered in South Africa
and is being found in more and more countries around the world.
The World Health Organization has labeled it a “variant of concern”
because of its large number of mutations
and early evidence suggesting an increased reinfection risk.
Christ have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Add to these your own tragedies, your own grief, your own laments.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

And, with everything, you can begin to wonder, what’s next?
What day is coming? Who are we expecting?

The answers to those two questions will determine how we live.
If we live in fear or dread of the days to come,
then we should hunker down and build walls
and close borders and imprison more people
and arm more guards and refuse more refugees.

After all, the days we fear are coming.
We need more time to prepare, to protect ourselves.

Or, if we see our days here on this earth as days to get through,
to simply endure before we can escape into heaven,
then we should stay to ourselves,
and care less about economic inequalities, environmental realities,
police shootings, and the injustices staring at us in our faces.

After all, the day is coming when all of this will be resolved.
We just need to get through this time of Advent so things can be made whole.

But Jesus does neither.

The signs he gives his disciples are merely pretext
to “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and great glory.”

When you see these things, Jesus tells his followers --
the confused nations, the terrors, the environmental calamities --
it’s not the time to protect yourself or to simply endure,
it’s the time to stand up and raise your head
for your redemption is drawing near.

To illustrate this point,
he reminded them that when the fig tree sprouts leaves,
they know that summer is near.

You can neither hasten summer’s arrival nor delay it.
The buds on the trees do not force summer to come,
they are simply signs of summer’s arrival.
It is the same way with the kingdom of God.

The days are coming, Jesus said, when heaven and earth will pass away,
but my words will not pass away.

Therefore, avoid getting caught up in the excessive pleasures or worries or fears of today.
Reject the despair of the hopeless and the frivolousness of the irresponsible.
Instead, heads up, be alert,
pray for the strength
to escape the fears and the dread that can paralyze your faith.

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, marks the beginning of the new church year.
The church year begins when the days are still getting darker,
notes Debie Thomas, an Episcopal pastor from Palo Alto, California.

She writes that Advent rejects shallow sentimentality and false cheer.
“We get started not with swaddling clothes,
the cattle lowing, the angels singing, and the star shining –
but of the world as it really is, here and now.”¹

“When you see these things,” Jesus says, don’t turn away.
Why? Because only when we embrace reality –
when we acknowledge and welcome the “here” of human suffering –
that we experience the nearness of God.

The one we are waiting for is Jesus of Nazareth,
the one who calls the lame to rise,
who heals the sick, who restores sight to the blind,
the one who brings life to the dead,

¹ Debie Thomas, “When you see these things,” *Journey with Jesus* (November 25, 2018),
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2018-when-you-see-these-things> [accessed November 25, 2021].

and casts away the demons.

The one who restores order to a boat full of disciples terrified for their lives.

The one who draws close to whatever situation you find yourself in --

those situations that seem to signal the end of the world as you know it.

Where is there crisis and turmoil? Where is there anguish and terror?

Where are the foundations being shaken?

What do you need to do to lift up your head and to see your redeemer?

How is God calling you to help others to stand and to receive their redemption?

Things worth waiting for happen in the dark, Thomas writes –

seeds break open in dark soil,

God's Spirit hovers over dark waters,

the unborn child grows in the dark womb

and the resurrected Christ emerges from the dark tomb.²

Dare to imagine:

deep in the gathering dark,

something tender continues to grow.

Yearn for it. Wait for it. Notice it. Imagine it.

Something beautiful, something for the world's saving, waits to be born.

Stand up. Raise your heads. Embrace hope.

"Sometimes," as the poet Mary Oliver wrote,

you "need only to stand where you are to be blessed."³

Advent is here, the day is coming, and it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

² Ibid.

³ Mary Oliver, *Evidence: Poems* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010).