

# **Advent Longings: Longing for God's Future**

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## **Luke 21: 25-36**

Here we are on the edge of the Christmas season. Christmas decorations have been out in stores since Halloween, I am starting to hear Christmas music on the radio and in stores, Black Friday has come and gone, at home we have put up our tree, and I have already ordered a small fishing vest for our grandson. Yes, Christmas is in the air and so we come to church perhaps expecting more of what our culture is already offering – good feelings and a festive spirit. But what do we get? “There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth, distress among nations...People will faint from fear and foreboding...” We get a scripture text filled with frightening images and confusing metaphors. It all seems so out of touch with the good feelings this season seems to demand. What happened to the smiling Mary and the cooing baby Jesus? Instead, on this first Sunday of Advent we meet a stern, adult Jesus, who speaks of the entire universe as being shaken and turned upside down.

A colleague once told me about a greeting card she had received. Inside the card was a cat offering the card's recipient a gesture of love – in its paws it held a heart-shaped hairball. That may be how we feel about this text – it's one hairball of a scripture lesson for a festive season such as this. And I would agree with you. Where is the good news here? What could Jesus possibly be talking about? And why do we have to deal with it now, just four Sundays before Christmas? Certainly no “city sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style” here. And maybe that's the point.

What we have in this text is apocalyptic literature – highly charged, metaphorical and vividly symbolic literature dealing with the end of time – the end of the old and the beginning of the new, with images of great calamities along the way. And many preachers, me, for example, tend to shy away from this literature – it seems so gloomy, strange, even violent. And, of course, it has also been terribly misused and abused by religious types over the years – think Left Behind – or all the predictions of the end of the world that have been and continue to be made, supposedly based on the Bible...and which have all been wrong.

And perhaps another reason I shy away from this literature is that my life seems pretty good right now. Yes, I worry about my 86-year-old father, I worry about an operating deficit in our current church budget that is not getting any better and, for good measure, I worry about our 2013 budget. I carry on my heart a number of people and families in our church who are facing challenging and anxious times. But, all in all, my life is okay. I feel good, Betty after some health challenges feels good, my children are healthy and happy, I delight in my grandson, last time I went fishing I actually caught some fish, we have a warm house and food to eat. And so, the dark images of apocalyptic really do not speak to me...at least not today.

But there have been other times, other days, days when the sky seemed dark and the foundations of the earth were shaking, when all I knew and trusted in life seemed to be breaking apart. My mother and sister in hospitals at the same time, on opposite sides of Phoenix, facing delicate and dangerous surgeries....surgeries that held back the darkness for a while, but could not overcome it for either of them. Days when my other sister was fighting a battle with drug abuse and her own failing health; days when my father seems to be gradually unraveling before my eyes – he seems so worried about everything.

And it isn't just about me. You hear the prayer concerns each Sunday. There are a number of people and families in this church who, when they hear Jesus in Luke speak of “fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world”, know exactly what he is talking about, who face dark nights with precious little light. And so, we could say that apocalyptic literature is brutally honest about our human situation. We all know the darkness, times when the hinges are torn off the doors of our lives: situations for which there seems no humanly conceivable way out, habits and addictions that are quite literally killing us, dilemmas for which there seems no human answer, anxiety that paralyzes us, grief that brings us to our knees, times when it seems the world is falling apart and God seems far, far away. And then we come here to worship and find ourselves face to face with this strange, sweeping, disturbing - yet strangely hopeful - vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

A story shared by a pastor: “After the devastating hurricane, all of the power had been out for the past three days. It was hot, humid and miserable during the day, but it was frightening at night. Rumors were that there had been much looting. Robberies had taken place. Again, there was no electricity, no way to call the overwhelmed police, no street lights. Thus, when, in the darkness, there was a pounding on our front door, we were filled with fear. Was this a robber? Was this a looter trying to find out if our house was empty? There was no way to call anyone for help.

“The knocking continued. We peered out the window and tried to make out the figures on the front porch. ‘Hey,’ a voice called out to us. ‘We’ve got a bag of ice for you and some fresh water too.’ It was our next door neighbors, our friends, who had come to bring us some wonderful and much needed gifts. As we peer into darkness in fear, it makes all the difference in the world whose face we see.”

Could that be why we encounter this particular text on this First Sunday of Advent? Indeed, could that be what Advent really is all about? Here, at the darkest time of the year, we hear the Advent message that when we look over the darkened and frightening and storm-filled horizon of our lives and of our world, we see looking back at us, indeed coming toward us, the face of Jesus; we see Emmanuel – God with us. When we wonder what tomorrow might bring, when we wonder if the storms of life will ever subside, when we ask who will bring light to our darkness, our text has an answer: “Christ is coming to make all things new....your redemption is drawing near.”

A story some of you have heard before. An old woman who lived deep in the bayous of Louisiana had raised over a dozen children, most of them adopted and/or foster children. A newspaper reporter heard about her and went out to interview her. When he asked why she had done this, had taken on such a daunting task, she replied, “I saw a new world a’comin.” That’s Advent...Christ is coming to make all things new.

The message of this text is...People, dare to hope; Gene Nelson, in all your anxiety about so many things, dare to hope. It’s Advent. These texts about the end of things actually have nothing to do with chronology – they are not about when. No, they are about who...who, in the end, is in charge, who, in the end, will overcome, whose promises, in the end, will be trustworthy and true. So ours isn’t a hope based on wishful thinking or a positive mental attitude. Our hope is grounded in the promises of God, promises we celebrate and reiterate each week in our Sunday worship.

During the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott, the story was told of an old black woman walking slowly down the street, refusing to ride a segregated bus. A car pulled up and the people inside called out, “Grandma, you’re too old for this. You don’t have to walk. Hop in and we’ll give you a ride.” But she refused, saying, “I’m not walkin’ for myself. I’m walkin’ for my children and my grandchildren.” She might not live to see the promise of equality fulfilled, but she still believed in it, and was willing to sacrifice to make it a new reality.

Year after year we come here and light the first Advent candle. Year after year we sing, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and speak of the promise of peace and good will for all. And year after year, it doesn’t happen. It seems we and our world continue to know the same pain, the same darkness, the longed-for perfection does not appear. But then I think of that old woman walking down that hot Montgomery, Alabama, street. She believed the possibility, she believed the promise, she believed the hope, and that belief, that faith, changed her, transformed her reality, indeed made her an agent of transformation. And indeed, her world did change.

“Your redemption is drawing near...” How can this be? It can be because God is faithful to this promise of Jesus; it can be because we can never take our own projections, our own assumptions, our own fears and anxieties more seriously than God’s promises. I’m not talking about pie-in-the-sky dreaming here. I am talking about real hope. I’m talking about daring to live a new reality, daring to stand erect, confident and hopeful no matter how grim our present reality or whatever beclouds our unsettled future. Live in expectation, prepare for God’s kingdom breaking forth. And let that expectation and preparation – let the promise - call you into the future and shape your life in the present as we await the radical, earth-shattering welcome of the Prince of Peace – the tiny baby and the risen Lord. Our redemption is drawing near.