

Luke 21:25-36 1 Advent 11/29/09 Pastor Bill Uetricht

Happy New Year! No, your pastor has not been partaking of too much of the proverbial Christmas eggnog this morning. No, he isn't becoming disoriented in place and time. This day is the first day of the new year in the church calendar. The church calendar begins with the first day of Advent. Happy New Year!

Isn't it intriguing that at the beginning of the year we in the church deal with the end? It is traditional that the readings of the first week in Advent deal with the end of time, with the second advent or coming of the Christ. It's as if we need the big picture as we begin the year. It's as if we need to know where we are going as we are beginning. In some ways we want to know the end of the story as we begin it.

Today we get a portion of Luke's version of the end, a portion of what sometimes is referred to as the "Lucan apocalypse." Just prior to our text today in Luke we are told about Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, about great violence being perpetrated against the people in that city. What appears to be a predictive piece really is a reflection on what was a recent historical occurrence for that city. Luke was written after 70 A.D. when the Romans desecrated the holy city and the temple within it. The people who were receiving his gospel were folks who knew the devastation that he described and the sense of the end that this devastation seemed to anticipate for them.

Today we are told of the things that will happen in the sky and on the earth as the end draws near. There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. In other words, the heavens get involved in the end. The earth, too, is engaged. There will be distress on the earth among the nations that are confused by the roaring of the sea and the

waves. In other words, not only in this great drama are there remarkable special effects, there is also a soundtrack. The seas that had been put in their place when God created everything in chapter one of Genesis would once again pose a threat to the earth. They will create a deafening sound. People's breath will be taken away; they will faint as the powers of the heavens shake. The earth, the sea, the sky, the heavens—everything is participating in the end that is drawing near.

Now before I try to limit the fear-producing character of these words I do want to indicate that for the Biblical writers there was no doubt a sense that tomorrow might not come, that the prospect of an end was real. The Greek view of history was that it was like a never-ending circle. The Hebrews, those who helped shape the Bible, thought that a history was more like a straight line with a beginning and an ending. Jesus in Luke's gospel is speaking of the ending. Someday, in this view, there may be no tomorrow. And to live as if this is not the case is to be foolish.

Methodist Bishop William Willimon tells a wonderful story about a time when he and his wife went to a funeral for a relative of one of the members of the congregation he was serving at the time. The funeral took place at an independent country Baptist church. As soon as the coffin was wheeled in the pastor began to preach, screaming words like this: "It's too late for Joe. He's dead. It's all over for him. He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can't now. It's over. But it ain't too late for you. People drop dead all the time. So why wait? Now is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus now."

After the funeral was over Willimon told his wife that this preaching was the worst preaching he had ever heard. What an awful thing to do a grieving family, he said to her. His wife agreed with him that the funeral was tacky, manipulative, and callous. Of course, she added, “the worst part of all is that it was true.”

The truth is that endings are real. Tomorrow may never come. It is not guaranteed. There is an urgency about life. To get the big picture as we begin the church year with Advent is to come to grips with the reality of the end. There is more to life than working, shopping, or eating. Now is the time to discover that. We need to be on guard so that our hearts, as Jesus in Luke says, are not weighed down with overindulgence, drunkenness, and the worries of this life. Advent is a time to become more vigilant, more aware of what truly matters, more centered on what truly is urgent. Life and relationships are too precious for us to act as if they don't need our attentiveness, our care, our action. Tomorrow may never come. The end, in many real ways, is at hand.

Now that a little bit of “the fear of God” has been instilled in you, let me return to the passage from Luke so that we begin to see that it is not really fear that Luke's Jesus is calling us to in light of the end that is thought to be real. After all the talk about signs in the heavens and signs on the earth and people fainting as the result of the shaking of the powers of the heavens, we are told to “stand up and raise our heads, because [our] redemption is drawing near.” The invitation is not to look down and cower in fear. The invitation is to stand up, look up, and wait not for our destruction but for our redemption, what's going to save us.

Barbara Rossing, a professor from the Lutheran School of Theology, says that for us to get what Luke is doing in this passage we must pay attention to the Greek word that Luke chooses for “world” when Jesus in today’s reading says, “people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the *world*.” The Greek word chosen is “oikoumene” which is close to our word for “economy” and refers to the inhabited world, the way we order political and economic life. As we are given visions of the end, we are being told that something is unsettling, shaking the economy, the order that we know in the world. What is coming, the redemption that is on its way is going to turn upside down what we know. Mary sang about that in the early part of Luke and we will hear it again in a couple of weeks: “My soul magnifies the Lord, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.” A turned upside down world is on its way. Look up. Don’t cower in fear. Live in courage and joy! Justice is on its way.

The call to realize that tomorrow may never come, the call to come to grips with the end is not a call to move you into fear. It is a call that wants you to be prepared for redemption, a call that wants you to be surprised by God’s amazing grace, by God’s ability to create something remarkably new in the midst of something that is horribly old. If we are not on guard we will miss what God will be up to in a little baby born in a no-named town in a cattle stall. We’ll miss how this turns birth upside down the world as we know it, how it brings us a whole new economy. If our lives are weighed down with overconsumption, a preoccupation with pleasure, shopping and consuming we might just miss what truly is wonderful, amazing, profound, and deep. We might just miss God’s economy and the

people who are a part of it. We might discover ourselves having everything, but connecting to nothing that truly matters.

Happy New Year! It's Advent, the beginning of the church year. We begin with the end, for there is an urgency about life. Our redemption is drawing near. Stand up! Raise your heads. Be on guard. Be alert. God is up to something new. You don't want to miss it.