

Discomfort and Hope

Dale Ramerman, Nov. 29, 2015;

Advent 1, Yr. C Luke 21: 25-36;

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**May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.**

A couple of weeks ago, when I read the Lectionary readings for this first Sunday of Advent, and the first Sunday of the Lectionary year in which we focus on the Gospel of Luke, I thought I had gotten the wrong readings. This is Advent, a time for prophecies of the Messiah, stories of angels, shepherds, wise men, the baby Jesus; a time for cinnamon and spice and everything nice. But instead we've heard stories of captivity and exile, destruction, surprise, judgment, confusing metaphors, frightening images and shocking admonitions.

Aren't Advent and Christmas times feel good and forget? That's what our culture says. Did we gather today to face the hard reality of our times, to be tested and prodded?

We are anxious about our world, and for good reason. Anxious about the degradation of creation resulting from global warming. Anxious about wars and rumors of wars and violence in our own county and throughout the world. Anxious about devastating images of hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing war and oppression, of children dying, and armed troops trying to fight them back. Anxious about fear in the faces of people in Europe and the United States when we see refugees coming our way. And worst of all, we are anxious about the pandering by some elected leaders, and want-to-be leaders, seeking their own political advantage in the misery of the others, offering not hope, but fear and hatred, suggesting locking the doors, pulling up the bridges, build walls and fences, starting another war. And they assert that all the violence and turmoil was done by the other, the foreigner, the stranger, the alien, by followers of Islam.

To a significant extent the Middle East turmoil is an outgrowth of the subjugation and exploitation inherent in colonization, which is the history that part of the world. But colonization reminds us of our own colonial history and

the attendant decimation of the Native American population and the widespread reliance on slavery and violence. Our own not too distant history is a record of brutality and injustice done in the name of God, Christianity and destiny, a record that should give use pause in blaming Middle East violence and the depredations of the Islamic State on the religion of of Islam.

Perhaps, deep down, we know the slaughter and subjugation that opened this country for settlement, and the slavery that enabled our country's rapid development, was sin from which we still benefit.

We live in anxious and difficult times, and when we turn to our gospel reading we hear Jesus say that this is what we should expect.

Our gospel reading has a bit of an apocalyptic, end of time, flavor, with predictions of disasters, signs in the stars, distress among nations. But it does not include the first 24 verses of Luke 21, which contain much more graphic warnings, for example,

Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations.

We want the gentle Jesus of our childhood, but even our abbreviated Gospel reading, forces us to ask, Who is this Jesus? Perhaps, Jesus is much more than words such as "born in a manger," "king" and "love" suggest. Jesus challenges us to open our eyes and be ready, not only for the birth in Bethlehem, but also for Jesus' return when he will fully inaugurate, on earth, the Kingdom of God about which Jesus speaks more than any other subject in the Gospels.

"Advent" means arrival as well as coming. Thus, with the season of Advent each year, we celebrate both Jesus' arrival at his birth and Jesus' future coming to fully consummate the Kingdom of God. We live in that in-between time in which, as Diane preached last Sunday, the Kingdom of God is both already here and is still to come. We are called to a life of commitment and service, to proclaim, and live out, the good news of Jesus. The Christian life is a time of living in-between, a time of awareness of Jesus and coming to know

Jesus, as we await his return, a time, as Diane suggested, “to look deeply at what is right and wrong in our actions and attitudes toward others and within our selves.” We wait, sometimes with nights filled with images of strange and redeeming events, events of which we are reminded by both the birth stories and with Jesus’ admonitions: the powers of the heavens will be shaken; do not let your hearts be worn down by the worries of this life; be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to endure, and then to stand before the Son of Man. My words will not pass away.

This same attitude of anticipation and hope is reflected in our passage from Jeremiah, probably written during the exile in Babylon, an exile understood as God’s punishment for Israel’s long history of faithlessness to God who had led them to freedom from Egypt. Their feelings of hopelessness in exile are captured in the words of Psalm 137:

*By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered you, O Zion.*

*As for our harps, we hung them up  
on the trees in the midst of that land.*

*For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, and our oppressors called  
for mirth:*

*“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”  
How shall we sing the Lord’s song  
Upon an alien soil?*

And yet the prophet Jeremiah, speaking for God, can say, I will bring you to Zion. I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.

Our Psalm for today, perhaps also written during the Exile, says in part:

*To you , O Lord, I lift up my soul;  
and my God I put my trust in you;  
let me not be humiliated,  
nor let my enemies triumph over me.*

...

*Show me your ways, O Lord,  
and teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth and teach me,*

*for you are the God of my salvation;  
in you have I trusted all the day long.*

Regardless of the turmoil, threats and anxieties that surround us, our lives are undergirded by the love of the God of our salvation, and the power of God's Holy Spirit.

As we will sing during our service of communion today:

*Many the gifts, many the people  
many the hearts that yearn to belong  
Let us be servants to one another,  
making your kingdom come.*

*Christ be our light!  
Shine in our hearts  
Shine through the darkness  
Christ be our light!  
Shine in your church  
gathered today.*

In this year of Luke, we will hear of Jesus' mighty works, his teachings about the Kingdom of God and the life we are called to live, and the hope God has set before us. Let us live this year in hope and expectation, with welcoming and generous hearts, secure in our hope that God's kingdom is at hand, and seeking opportunities to serve both our neighbor and the stranger we welcome into our midst.

May it ever be so.

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