

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Hatfield
First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2021
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe
“Cosmic Upheaval” (Luke 21:25-36)



I don't know about you, but this apocalyptic text feels just about right for this particular day in the life of planet Earth.

Three years ago when we had this same reading I probably said something like, Why are we hearing a text like this on the first Sunday of Advent? We have finally finished cleaning up from Thanksgiving. We are getting our tree and starting on our cards. We are oozing gently into the familiar rhythms of the Christmas season. So why must we deal with a reading like this when we would rather to think about snowflakes, Santa and baby Jesus?

But this year, Luke 21 is here to hit us over the head because this is really where we are. We already knew the pandemic wasn't really going away anytime soon, and now there is suddenly a lot more gloom and doom coming at us. We have no choice but to look reality in the face. Jesus' words jolt every fiber of our being and demand a response from each of us: What are you going to do about this? What do you hope for, to whom does the future belong, and how are you going to live your life in that reality?

To the first question, “What are we going to do about this?” The answer begins with acknowledging the signs of endings all around us. Roaring waves of distress are rolling through the nations. The poor are most affected because they have the least access to defenses--only 10% of those living on the continent of Africa have had even one dose of the vaccine--but unless one is living the life of a hermit, the virus can still strike anyone at any time. Even with booster we really have no idea of what might happen or how susceptible we might be to the next variant. Adding to the general confusion, not knowing has become a way of life: As much as science tries to keep us informed, mutations are occurring more quickly than even the best infectious disease specialists can keep up with, and vaccines are inevitably a few paces behind.

Our foundations are being shaken in other ways: Families and faith communities are splintering into factions for and against. Defensive posturing has opened the floodgates to some of the worst human behavior imaginable. We have seen, heard and read things we never imagined, bodies piling up on streets, the dead simply abandoned. Our lives are forever changed--we cannot forget these things have happened in our world, in our time

The pandemic does not mean the end of the world is coming. The world has been through previous pandemics. What it does is frame our ministry in Christ by bringing us face to face with our mortality. And here is the essence of our discipleship: Jesus says we are not to “faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world,” but be empowered in the midst of calamity to a heightened awareness of the signs of redemption that are in our midst, which point to the fulfillment of all that God has promised. “Now when these things begin to take place,” Jesus says, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

I have heard many people dealing with serious illnesses or in spiritual distress testify to phenomena that they interpret as certain signs of God's redeeming presence, simple things others may not have noticed. A rainbow glimpsed at its most intense. Shafts of light that suddenly form within clouds and stream down in breathtaking patterns. The appearance of certain animals at strategic moments--a white hawk, a great horned owl, a bald eagle. Jesus offers the easy example of the fig tree, the only tree native to Judea which regularly loses its leaves each year so that new growth is a certain sign of the season to come. It's obvious: Watch for this sign and you'll know what is coming. It's already set. It's already in motion. Our redeemer has already come. God's plan to rescue humankind from the jaws of sin has already been executed. We are simply witnesses to its fulfillment!

Acutely aware of our mortality, these and other signs alert us to this fulfillment and indicate how life is to be cherished in all its fullness. "Take every opportunity to testify," Jesus urges in Luke just before today's reading. Testify to what you know to be true. Testify by living as kingdom people. Commit to radical acts of justice. Embrace radical acts of kindness. Welcome strangers with radical words of love. Take chances. Go out on a limb. Surprise yourself with your boldness!

A few days ago I was ushered into the small waiting room of a doctor's office. The nurse asked an older woman if she could move down a couple of seats to make room for me. With some difficulty the woman obliged. Under her breath she said, "It's an effort to even stand up." Normally I might have respected her space but I decided in this case not. "Why is that?" I asked. "Because of my husband," she said, "I'm just so tired." "Why?" I persisted. Then it came out: He had recently had his foot amputated and caring for him on her own was proving to be overwhelming. This gave me a chance to share a bit of Bill's story, telling her that after rehab Bill is now fully self-sufficient in matters of daily living. "So it gets better?" she asked hopefully. "Yes," I assured her. As she got up to leave, I noticed she was holding her head higher. "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near!"

Watch. Be alert. This is what Advent is all about. Advent is the best season because it is what the church is made for. Watching and waiting and praying together, knowing our redemption is near, even as our foundations are being shaken. The foundations started shaking on the night when God entered into our time and space to take on human form and to suffer and die for us so that we could experience the breadth of God's love and the entire forgiveness of all our sins. The foundations continued shaking as Jesus proclaimed a new world order that turned the old one upside down. And foundations will stop shaking only when the reforming of the entire cosmic order is complete. In the meantime, how exciting it is, how thrilling, that we are called to participate in that re-forming!

And why do we need the church? Because we can't do it alone. For the things we are called to see, and to which we must give witness, it takes an entire community of watchers and of believers to lead the way. So heed the signs, people of God, and lead on into Advent and beyond! Amen.