

November 29, 2009

Luke 21:25-36

"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 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."

Sermon by Susi Kawolics

It seems a bit odd to be reading a scripture passage dealing with end times when we are just beginning our journey into Advent. Although this is the season in which we prepare for the coming of Christ, and we do believe Christ will come again, we have a hard time believing that it is actually this event we are preparing for. After all, people have been waiting for nearly 2000 years, and it has not happened yet. So while most of us, in this season of Advent, do not think very much about preparing for the end of the world, we do think a lot about preparing for Christmas. We have decorations to put up, presents to buy, cards to send, food to cook, parties to attend, travel arrangements to make, and on and on. It is in this season that there is a big contrast between our cultural attitude, and the stance we take toward Advent in the church. Culturally, we experience this season as a time to get ready for Christmas. In church, however, we stress getting ready for the coming of Christ – putting more emphasis on the preparation of our hearts than preparation of our homes. Liturgically, Advent is really a time to slow down rather than to speed up and run around frantically getting everything done. This is a time when we are called to patiently wait in hopefulness for the coming of Christ. The paradox is, of course, that Christ has already come, that Christ is already here. So what I believe today's reading really calls us to in this slowing down time is being deliberately aware and alert to signs of Christ's presence. The images from Jeremiah of branches coming from deadwood, and from Luke of the leaves beginning to bud on the fig tree both provide a context for our journey through the Advent season. We are called slow down enough to be alert to signs of new realm, the Kingdom of God.

In her book "To Dance with God", Gertrud Mueller Nelson talks about how primitive cultures approached this season. When the darkness of the winter months became prolonged, like it does in December, people used to actually take the wheels off their carts and wagons, bring them into their home, and decorate them with greenery and lights. Our present day Advent wreath tradition stems from this practice.

This custom was a tangible way for those people to mark the changing pace of life. Making a conscious choice about not traveling by any wheeled mode of transport – they acknowledged that this was time for a slower pace.

Today, we seem to do just the opposite of what our ancestors did. December becomes our busiest month, the month where we pick up the pace rather than slowing down. Obviously, it would be impossible for most of us to survive the month of December without our wheels. But perhaps this image of a slower pace is one to carry with us as we enter the season of Advent.

I decided that I would try to live a day in this Advent mode – to slow down a bit and deliberately be alert to evidence of the often hidden presence of Christ. I wanted to be awake to the signs of this presence, and decided to actually expect to encounter Christ. And here's what happened when I tried it on Friday.

I read the Plain Dealer in the morning. In it, I found two stories that brought to life the image of branches springing up from a stump that was presumed dead. Usually one has to really search for any up-lifting news on TV or in the paper – but Friday, on the front page, was a heart-warming account about a woman who cooks Thanksgiving dinner every year for MetroHealth nurses, because they took care of her son, who died of a brain tumor when he was 5 years old. She is still so grateful for the wonderful care he received while alive, that for fifteen years, she has thanked the nurses every year with a homemade Thanksgiving dinner. Out of the tragic death of her young child has sprung a heart of gratitude, a sign of generous love, a piece of God's Kingdom on this earth.

Then, reading further in the paper, I saw an editorial entitled: Signs of Hope in Detroit. This truly looked like an Advent story just from the title – and indeed it was. The author, Bob Herbert was asking the question – Is the economic, social and physical deterioration that has caused so much misery in the motor city a sign of what's in store for larger and larger segments of the United States? Or are there new industries waiting in the wings – some of them right in Detroit with new jobs, and bright new prospects for whole new generations of American dreamers? He believes the answer is the latter. He went on to write about Stan Ovshinsky, who invented a flexible solar energy material that is being produced in a factory there. This inventor has always been driven by the desire to use science and technology to solve the real-world problems of real people, and that has meant creating employment and stopping the pollution of the planet. His plant offers both – and is another sign of hope, of newness coming out of a depressed and seemingly dead economy.

Later on Friday, I heard an interview on the radio with artist Chuck Close. He is one of the top names associated with both Pop Art and Photo-Realism, and is known for his black and white grid face portraits. In 1988, this renowned artist suffered the collapse of a blood vessel in his spinal column, and after 8 months in a hospital, he was left paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair. But within a year, he resumed painting with brushes strapped to his right hand. Close now says "My new portraits have a celebratory aspect that wasn't there before ... because I feel so happy that I was able to get back to work." What an incredible Advent like attitude for an artist to have. He has made a new life out of his devastating medical condition.

In addition to reading and hearing these stories, my whole day was enveloped by the joyful atmosphere of my family being together, my daughter and a friend home from college, all of us getting along in an easy manner. This peaceful harmony I also saw as a gift – a sign of God's Kingdom in the midst of our often troubled world.

Now, I am not suggesting that we ignore the bad news around us, or sad situations we find ourselves and our loved ones in. We are not called to live with blinders on, pretending that everything is great while there are still many problems and tragic conditions in the world. But we can choose what we focus on, and what consumes our thoughts. And perhaps by slowing down a bit, we will live less by our gut reactions to

situations and stories, and more by our heart reactions. In this way, when we encounter bad news, and difficult situations, instead of getting sucked in and stressed out, our first reaction might be to pray – and to discern what we are called to do.

Because, while Advent calls us to see the good news of God's Kingdom among us, and to witness to that good news, it also calls us to be the good news. We can be the presence of Christ in someone's Christmas. Just like Scrooge in Dickens' famous story "A Christmas Carol", we do have some control over our own future Christmas. Scrooge was given an image by the Ghost of Christmas future – but it wasn't set in stone. He had the power to change it if he wanted to. He had the ability to make a difference in what Christmas was both for himself and for others. So Advent calls us to not only point to the signs of the Kingdom already here, but to further that Kingdom along.

Readings like the one we hear in Scripture today might make it sound all we're doing is waiting for Christ to come back to make everything right. But that's not the whole story. Advent is a time of waiting, but not of passive waiting. In acts of kindness, compassion and generosity, in time spent listening to and serving others, we become the presence of Christ in our world.

The way we choose to spend the Advent season will affect our experience of Christmas. May we slow down and become more deliberate in our actions, more alert to God's presence. Just as nothing in nature grows if the soil is constantly disturbed, so too will the spirit of Christmas not grow in us if our lives are in constant motion and stress. The nature images in our readings can guide our Advent season. Let us be alert to the sprouting branches coming from the seemingly dead wood of lives, to the budding leaves of the fig tree giving evidence of a new season. Not only trees, but also the image of the rose captures the Advent spirit. In Bette Midler's song "The Rose" we are reminded that beneath the bitter snows of winter lies the seed that becomes the rose in the spring. Also, in the traditional Christmas song, the Rose e'er blooming comes amidst the cold of winter. May we slow down enough to see and be those roses of hope beneath the avalanche of busyness, fret and worry that surround so many people. May we bring a glimmer of color to a sometimes bland, depressing world, showing a glimpse of the love of Christ and the presence of the Kingdom promised and already in our midst. Amen.