

The Signs of the Times

Luke 21:25-36

It's the First Sunday of Advent. The shopping malls have been displaying Christmas decorations and playing carols since just after Halloween. Children have already watched the Detroit/Art Van Christmas parade. Parents and grandparents have been stocking up on the perfect Christmas gifts for months. And now we come to church to experience Advent worship. If we come expecting more of what their culture offers, we are certainly in for a rude awakening! In worship we don't find Santa, nor do we encounter a smiling young Mary, a cooing baby Jesus, inquisitive shepherds, or singing angels. We are both disappointed and dismayed by this Gospel text.

This section of Jesus' speech from the temple in Jerusalem is full of frightening images, confusing metaphors, and shocking admonitions. We do not encounter the sweet baby Jesus we wait for during Advent this first Sunday, but the stern, adult Jesus, picturing the whole universe being shaken and turned upside down. It is not a text most of us are thrilled to explore especially when we don't understand why the church "can not just get on to Christmas already!"

The season of Advent demands a very different kind of preparation than the shopping malls and glitzy catalogs recommend. And on this First Sunday of Advent our scripture sets a very different tone than the cultural Christmas season that surrounds us outside the church. Vincent van Gogh captured the mood of this Advent text in his most famous painting, *The Starry Night* (1889). The painting exhibits the bold colors that van Gogh is known for and

the postimpressionist style that he helped to make famous. Van Gogh was the son of a Dutch pastor and for a time an evangelist to the poor himself, so he was likely familiar with texts such as ours from Luke 21. The painting depicts an apocalyptic sky, like that described by Jesus. There are swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep, dark blue and black. There is a bold and bright yellow moon and very bright stars, described by one art critic as "rockets of burning yellow." In the background is a small town, with the church steeple as its most prominent feature. In the foreground, a foreboding flame like image connects earth and sky. Art historians take it to be a cypress tree, which in van Gogh's time would have been associated with graveyards and mourning. The famous painting elicits differing reactions from those who admire it. Some see it as a daunting image of a frightening sky, others as something bold and beautiful, and others as a glimpse of God.

Like van Gogh's great painting, Luke's apocalypse elicits different reactions from those who admire it. Frightening, bold, and beautiful glimpses of God—this is what Jesus offers on this First Sunday of Advent. As difficult as it is to hear, as troubled as our scripture may make us feel, in it are treasures that help focus us on the true meaning and purpose of Advent. In it, Jesus challenges us, as he did his original hearers in the Jerusalem temple, to look up, pay attention, and be ready. Advent means "coming" or "arrival," and this apocalyptic text from Luke gives us the opportunity to remember that Advent involves preparing for two comings: God coming to earth in the infant Jesus whom we await at Christmas, and Christ returning to earth at a time we do not know. With this second Advent, it is not a matter of if, but of when, and Jesus wants us to be ready. We do so, Jesus says, by keeping alert, constantly preparing, and continuing to put our hope in our loving God, who comes to us in Jesus Christ.

Some of us hear in these words its fearful tones, others its encouragement and consolation. For over a decade at the turn of the twenty-first century, the bestselling fiction series *Left Behind* has captured readers all over the globe. The focus of the series is on the end times and the great turmoil that exists in the world as the forces of good and evil face off in preparation for Christ's second coming. The books and movies foster fear and desperation for those who may get "left behind."

Luke's painting of the apocalypse resists this fearful interpretation. Despite some frightening images, our Advent text from Luke offers not fear and damnation, but hope and expectation. God in Christ is coming because God loves us—because God wants to redeem us (v. 28). In the midst of the fearful specter, Jesus calls us to "stand up and raise [our] heads, because [our] redemption is drawing near." We may not live as Luke's community, on the margins of society, in a world riddled with disease and drought and despair; the place where many of our modern sisters and brothers find themselves today. Nevertheless, we too find hope in apocalyptic writing about a better world that can break forth at any time. Famine, drought, war, disease, still plague our world, and closer to home people struggle with greed, addiction, mental illness, and misplaced priorities. Christ's call to be alert and constantly praying for God's kingdom to break through into our world is as pertinent a call for us this Advent as it ever has been. Our broken and hurting selves and world need Christ to come, and we must take time this Advent to prepare to receive him.

Luke wrote with a deep and growing sense that Christian discipleship is a kind of *living in between*—aware of Jesus, waiting for Jesus, and coming to know this Jesus for whom we wait in the midst of an eventful, unpredictable,

even tumultuous world, waiting to stand before him, yet not always knowing where he is.

"Look at the fig tree. It tells you when summer is coming. Read the times as you read a fig tree. Stay awake. Do not let your hearts be weighed down with things distracting from the truth of it." "The world's a scary place, but don't let your hearts be troubled. I have overcome the world. So wait in the midst of it all, just before the dawn, for in the midst of the night there are strange and redeeming events afoot."

And with this the church begins a new church year, asked to begin afresh, not just on a calendar, but in individual hearts, in relationships, in congregations, and in our yearning for a promise worth living for. As we hear this passage we are bidden to live lives of faithful, actively waiting in the *meantime* because they hear again the name of the One who holds us in the *ending* time. **Wesley D. Avram**

For us the good news of Advent is not simply that Christ is coming, but that his coming means we can hope, despite all that is falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world around us. Just as the leaves on the fig tree offer hope in late winter that spring and eventually summer is coming again, so God's word, in Jesus, promises us new life. Advent offers us expectation and hope for something new. "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (v. 28). "Be alert at all times" (v. 36). May we who come to Advent worship and leave with a commitment to use this season of Advent to prepare for God's kingdom breaking forth, as we await the radical, earth-shattering welcome of the Prince of Peace—the little baby, and the risen Lord. **Kathy Beach-Verhey**

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