

“Coming With Real Power” – Advent I – Dec 3/06

How many of you are wondering if either I opened the book to the wrong page, or if there's some kind of “bait-and-switch” happening with the gospel text this morning? After all, this is the First Sunday in Advent, the church season that runs us up to Christmas; the loudspeakers in the malls are already jing-jing-jingling with Christmas music; the television ads are saturated with Christmas ideas – with “ding-dong-ding!” being a mild hint about “ka-ching, ka-ching, bong” – nobody could fault you for coming to church today with the hope of getting into the festive spirit.

But here we are instead listening to a text from Luke's gospel that sounds like the end of the world! Luke, one of the only two gospels that brings us the Christmas story, talking here about signs in the skies, distress among the nations, roaring of the sea, people fainting from fear and foreboding. Hardly the stuff that leads to jolly Ho-Ho-Ho's, is it?! Nothing here about virgin and child, shepherds and angels and heavenly choirs, but instead the shaking of heaven and earth in confusion and trepidation.

This year in the Lectionary cycle is not different from the other years, either, because in all three years the gospel texts for the First Sunday in Advent are drawn from the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus. Why so? Why, when the rest of our society is gleefully setting up tinsel trees and nativity scenes are we in worship looking at what seem to be such inappropriate readings?

It hopefully will come a bit clearer as to why we use these readings once we understand that they do indeed provide a most appropriate introduction to the Advent Season. First, of course, is the obvious connection based on the name of the season – Advent – the Latin word meaning “the coming.” During the Season of Advent we anticipate and celebrate the coming of Jesus, born a child in a stable in Bethlehem. But we need to set that anticipation and celebration in its proper context, and once again become conscious that the coming of the Lord includes much more than the Christmas story. If we separate the Nativity, the birth of Jesus, from the rest of the story of the coming of the Lord, the Christmas story becomes nothing more than a sweet, heart-wrenching tale of a young couple and a baby, surrounded by some mysterious events and heavenly music. And if we reduce the Christ story to nothing more than the Christmas story, we trivialize God's action in the history of the world – and doing so results in a tragedy worthy of trembling and foreboding. Advent is God's doing – of such significance that heaven and earth reverberate with the signs – and that is the second connection.

It is in response to the disciples' questions to Jesus about signs that we have his answer here in Luke's gospel. Jesus, in the temple according to Luke, has told not just the disciples but all the people about the coming time of distress and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the disciples ask him how they will know – “when and with what signs will these things take place?” In an expansion of what he has just said, Jesus provides a four-part answer: describing the coming of the Son of Man; the parable of the fig tree; the time of the coming of the Son of Man; and the ending of the larger block of teaching. When you see this four-part answer set within that larger block of teaching that took place in the temple, the sequence of events comes clear. The followers of Jesus will have a time of witnessing, in response to which there will be severe persecution – both religious and political. As a result, Jerusalem will be destroyed and the nations will watch it happen. When the time of the nations has been fulfilled, the Son of Man will come in a cloud with power and glory, attended by signs in the heavens, an event that will affect the whole earth and bring distress to many. And just when will this happen? “Within this generation”, says Luke (v.31-32). With this statement Luke joins many other early Christians in the belief that they were living in the period between God's punishment of Jerusalem by the Gentiles (nations) and God's judgment of the nations by the Son of Man, whose appearance will bring redemption to the faithful.

But there's a third connection between this reading of apparent distress and turmoil and the Christmas story – in both there is a huge statement of God's grace and mercy. In Luke's account of the prediction of the apocalyptic arrival of the Son of Man, there is an assurance to the followers of Christ that the final shaking of heaven and earth will not be for them an occasion for fear and distress. On the contrary, the day of judgment is the day of grace: "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Now this could easily seem like an empty promise, a "throw-away" line of "not to worry!", except for the first arrival of the expected Messiah. Far from the fearful and powerful mighty King, destined to slap down all other nations and raise Jerusalem and the Jews out of their oppression under Rome, the Messiah arrived in humble circumstances, a helpless baby with only straw for a bed. What more graceful arrival could the Messiah have had than that?! And following a ministry of healing and mercy, Jesus displayed the ultimate grace of God in his death and resurrection, sealing for all time the promise to all who would believe of redemption and acceptance by God when the Son of Man returns. A promise sealed in his body and his blood, and we acknowledge that promise in each Holy Communion, as we affirm that we await his return in glory.

And so we begin this Season of Advent with a blunt reminder that the Christmas story is about way more than just a sappy, feel-good story of a baby in a manger – the Christmas story is all of that but it's also way, way more, for it is about a grace-filled event of God in which the Messiah comes among us as one of us, Immanuel, God with us, coming not with the flashy surface power of a nation's leader but with all the real power of a loving, healing, forgiving, accepting, redeeming God. Coming with such real power that he was able to lay down his life as an offering for ours, bringing grace and redemption. Yes, let us as we are cautioned be alert at all times, ready to stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near – and in the meantime let us anticipate and celebrate the Advent, the coming of the Christ-child with real power.