

“Beyond The Tinsel” – Advent 1 – Nov 29/15

I heard a fascinating account on the radio the other day ... the afternoon crew were discussing how a woman's blog site had exploded with responses to her question about what was an appropriate level of gifting for children at Christmas. Apparently she touched a very raw nerve, because the site was so quickly flooded with responses that she considered shutting it down for a while. The responses ranged from rants about children being spoiled to threats in response to perceived slights about being spoiling parents. What a wonderful, peace-on-earth kind of kickoff to the Christmas season, eh? Mind you, the same comment could be made about our Gospel reading this morning. Listening to that reading from Luke I'd be willing to bet that at least some of you thought, "Good grief, what has all this negative and gloom-and-doom stuff got to do with Christmas?! For this First Sunday in Advent isn't there something in the bible that has at least a little more of the spirit of the season?"

I can't say I blame you ... now that we have passed Halloween we're starting to be inundated with Christmas – at least with Christmas shopping! Loudspeakers in the malls are already jing-jing-jingling with Christmas music; television ads are saturated with Christmas themes – nobody could fault you for coming to church today with the hope of encountering the festive spirit.

But instead here we are listening to a text from Luke's gospel that sounds like the end of the world! From Luke, one of the only two gospels that brings us the Christmas story, we hear about signs in the skies, distress among the nations, roaring of the seas, 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; here we have instead the shaking of heaven and earth in confusion and trepidation.

Why so? Well, blame it on the Lectionary, the widely-followed three-year cycle of scripture readings for Sundays in the Church Year. This year (Year 'C' if you would like to impress friends at office Christmas parties) in the Lectionary cycle is similar on this Sunday to the other years because in all three years the gospel texts for the First Sunday in Advent are drawn from what scholars call the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus. Why so? Why, when the rest of our society is gleefully setting up tinsel trees and nativity scenes, why are we looking in worship at what seem to be such inappropriate readings? Fear not, because there are several reasons I can offer as to why this reading is actually 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. We benefit from once again becoming consciously aware that the coming of our Lord includes much more than simply 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 gooey-sweet, heart-wrenching tale of a young couple and a baby, surrounded by some mysterious events and heavenly music. 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.

The second reason this text is appropriate to Advent is given by Jesus' own words. It is in response to the disciples' questions to Jesus about signs that we have his answer here in Luke's gospel. Signs foretold the birth of Jesus, and signs will signal his return. 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. There is an affirmation of hope in the midst of turmoil. 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.” In the midst of all of the turmoil and trouble to come, Christians are told to hope in God for their safety and redemption.

People have heard other messages of hope in times of trouble and turmoil. Perhaps one of the most memorable in our time was the famous inspirational speech by Winston Churchill in the dark hours after the evacuation of the troops from Dunkirk and the fall of France – his famous “we shall fight them on the beaches . . . we shall never give up” (apparently modeled on a similar speech by Elizabeth I as the Spanish Armada approached some four hundred years earlier.) Or his “this was perhaps their finest hour” referring to the RAF pilots who had turned the tide in the Battle of Britain in September of 1940. On this World’s AIDS Day Sunday it is also appropriate to recall the words of Harvey Milk who according to a documentary is quoted as saying “we cannot live by hope alone, but it is hope that helps us look forward to life.”

All of these assurances could easily seem like empty promises, “throw-away” lines of “don’t worry, be happy!” The same might also be said about the assurance of hope from Christ, except that God has already shown the ultimate reason for hope in the first arrival of the expected Messiah. In dramatic contrast with the anticipated fearful and powerful mighty King who would through bloody war and chaos 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 then after a ministry of healing, mercy, and inclusion, Jesus displayed the ultimate grace of God in his death and resurrection, sealing for all time the promise of hope 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 simply a feel-good story of a baby in a manger – and certainly way more than decorated trees and shiny lights and tinsel. 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 apparent 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.

This is the foundation underneath the Christmas story that brings us hope even or especially in the midst of the turmoil of life that surrounds us. This is your assurance that you can have hope because your redemption has already drawn near and that Christ will indeed return – but in the meantime let us anticipate and celebrate the Advent, the coming of the Christ-child with real power.