

Advent Again

Luke 21:25-36

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

1st Sunday in Advent

I.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, a sort of New Year's Day on the Christian liturgical calendar. The season of Advent has everything to do with time. Advent is a season in which time is layered upon itself.

Even as we come during Advent to remember God's promises fulfilled by telling the old stories of Jesus' birth, so do we prepare our hearts to receive the Christ Child anew so that God's promises will continue to live in us. And even as we dwell in the now, so are we reminded of God's future promises, what scripture calls, in Greek, the *parousia*, or Second Coming of Christ, and what tradition calls the second Advent.

Today we have lit the Advent candle of hope. Advent hope is not fluffy or simple, and it is not even particularly comforting. Advent hope is nothing like wishful thinking, nothing like the expectation for a certain present on Christmas morning. Advent hope is hope that is accomplished in active waiting, in alertness, and in preparing oneself to receive the surprising gifts of God's grace.

I suppose this hope is what Jim White and I were after 10 years ago, during Advent, when we decided to create an Advent season based upon the bizarre imagery of the Book of Revelation. Instead of the traditional candle colors, we chose to use the colors of the four horsemen depicted there: white, red, black, and green. On the four pillars of the church we depictions of the four creatures in Revelation, chapter 4.

I'm not sure our creativity made for a cozy and comfortable Advent season, and we certainly heard our share of feedback, but in our defense, Advent is a time to contemplate time itself: The beginning, the past, the present, the future, and, ultimately, the end. If this contemplation clashes with the other means by which we seek to prepare for Christmas, so be it. It seems to me consumerism should never be allowed to proceed without appealing to our deeper awareness of others. Cultivating awareness is, perhaps, a unique role the church plays in our society.

II.

Today's scripture text, like the Book of Revelation, may be described as "apocalyptic." Apocalyptic writing, such as that which we find in the 21st chapter of Luke, does at least 3 things:

First, contrary to popular assumption, apocalyptic writers in the Bible do not pretend to predict the future. They describe, with brutal honesty, the reality of the present. According to Luke's Jesus: There will be "distress among the nations" (v.25) and "people will faint from fear and foreboding" (v.26).

Second, apocalyptic literature appeals to those suffering in the present through the use of fantastic images to describe a vision of hope for the future. Drawing upon the Old Testament Book of Daniel, Luke's Jesus says people "will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory" (v. 27).

Third, apocalyptic scripture instructs the community in what its attitude should be, and in what its duties and practices must be, in light of the reality of the age and the promise of a God-filled future. In the passage from Luke, Jesus offers these verbs:

look

be on guard

do not get weighed down, despondent, drunk, or worried

be alert

pray at all times.

In Luke's gospel, this apocalyptic section, chapter 21, immediately precedes the beginning of the end for Jesus. The section heading that begins the very next chapter, chapter 22, is "The plot to kill Jesus." In our liturgical year, Luke's apocalypse is the good news that puts us in an Advent mood. I see in your eyes, some of you are asking, how can an apocalypse be good news? Well, I am so glad you asked.

If we think that life is all about looking after ourselves, then an apocalypse isn't very good news. But most people, I believe, have at least some sense that the world is bigger than their own lives. Most people have some inkling that, as humans, we belong to each other, and depend upon each other. Most people have a faint notion that another world is possible, that we need not rely upon might to make right, or wealth to ensure health.

If you are a person who has dared to dream, in the face of persistent nightmares that all too often creep into reality; dared to dream that new alternatives are available, alternatives that seek to alter the way we humans currently order our relationships with each other and with the planet; if you are such a person, then I believe today's text has a word of good news in it for you.

III.

Very often, to receive the good news, we must first take stock of the bad news to which the good news will address itself and offer itself as a better alternative. For example, on Tuesday, President Obama is expected to announce his decision to order an increase of troops in Afghanistan. Many of us are prepared to receive this news with a great deal of ambivalence.

We reason:

A surge of troops in Iraq seemed to have worked.

More U.S. military personnel have been injured in Afghanistan during recent months.

The Taliban is resurgent and the Afghan government and military are not up to the task.

Whether we thought it was a good idea or not to go in the first place, Al Qaida has not been destroyed and Afghan civilians (perhaps especially women and children) would bear the worst of our withdrawal.

If Afghanistan fell, would Pakistan be next?

Don't we owe it to ourselves, to those who've died in combat, to the Afghan people, to finish the job we set out to do?

These are some of the arguments and questions that support a decision to order a surge in troops.

This reasoning bears witness to the current reality of the "distress among nations" described in today's text. A troop surge decision addresses the "fear and foreboding" that cause many of us to assume that the military option is the only viable option. Our military is mighty, we reason. Let them do what they've been trained to do. Let them keep us safe. It's our only option. Only violence can drive out violence.

I have been among the ambivalent and the undecided. But I read today's text and I pondered and prayed. And I came to the conclusion that while I believe that our military is capable and mighty, I also believe that God is yet more capable and more mighty. I believe in the Advent witness that darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that.

There are other options. This last week, I joined hundreds of signators to a letter, drafted by Sojourners, which was sent to the president. It can be found at www.sojo.net. The options for U.S. policy toward Afghanistan listed in the letter are, to me, more compelling than the military options. And they are a better investment - better than spending one billion dollars per 1000 troops. That's one million dollars per soldier.

The new approach called for by the letter is "a humanitarian and development surge." Specifically, the letter calls for relying upon "the NGO's, both faith-based and secular, doing relief and development work which have been [in Afghanistan] for years, have become quite indigenous, and are much for trusted by the people of the country than are the U.S. military."

The letter recognizes "that effective development needs security, and when we have massively intervened in a country as much as the U.S. has in Afghanistan, we can't responsibly walk away... but we should lead with economic development now, starting in areas that are secure with the play of growing the transformation from there and providing only the security necessary to protect the strategic rebuilding of the country."

I don't often pray for miracles, but I'm in an apocalyptic mindset today and fresh possibilities are available to me. I'm praying for a last-minute change of mind from President Obama. The day I heard he had received the Nobel Peace prize, I cried. Along with others, I didn't fully understand why he had received it, but I cried nonetheless. I cried because I long to be counted as one among a people who values peace above power.

Perhaps I'll cry again on Tuesday. I hope it's because I'll be surprised by some new thinking on this now 8 year old conflict, but I fear it will be because I'll be crushed by the irony that someone would choose a military solution in the same month he receives the Nobel Peace Prize.

IV.

I believe that in a time like this, we need "apocalypse." When options seem limited, and when it seems the only promise available is the promise of more war, we need the word of God to break in. We need a new word from God that will call into question all earthly authorities. And we need to be a people who have prepared ourselves to trust in that new word, that fantastic new promise of God.

Having looked around us and discerned the signs of the times, having been on guard and having gotten ready, and having kept ourselves from becoming distracted by our culture's myriad temptations, we will not cower in fear, but, as Jesus tells us to do, we will stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near. Redemption is what happens when the people of God are doing what they are called to do.

These are the days and the moments and challenges to which the people of God are called. Faith in Christ is not about giving up on this tired old world. Faith in Christ is about standing up for the world, it is about choosing to believe in the power of God over the power of violence and every other lesser power that diminishes human life.

Let us stand up, with heads raised, confident that, God so *loved* the world, that God gave God's only begotten Child, the light of the world, who came into the world on Christmas, not so that the world might perish, but so that all the people, even the creation itself, might have abundant life. Amen.