

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
November 29, 2015
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Texts – Jeremiah 33: Luke 21: 25-36

This past week, I did some “time travel.” Travel backwards through my file of Advent 1 notes and resources for the first Sunday of this new liturgical year, Year C. As is true each year on the first Sunday of Advent, we are treated to some jarring images, this time from Luke of “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 fainting from fear and foreboding of what is coming.

My travel showed me that in years past, I have tended to side step these, either by treating them in a cosmic manner or as a critique of those who focus on that fear and foreboding, predicting the end times. Or, I dance around them altogether by spiritualizing – preaching only about the waiting and anticipation, the spiritual disciplines of taking time away from the cultural madness of long lead up to Christmas. That’s not all bad, of course, but there are other Advent Sundays for that.

This year, Jesus’ words recorded by Luke – and those of the prophet Jeremiah – strike home in a powerful way as I consider what is going on all around us in our own world, in our time. The anger, the disrespect, the violence and hatred. And the fear. Most of all the fear. The fear that causes us either to batten down the hatches or build walls to preserve our sense of safety or to strike out at anything that might disrupt the social structure that has been to our benefit. Is the prophet, is Jesus, speaking words that we need to hear?

One of the articles I found in my folder was written in 2,000. It is a commentary by one of the giants of contemporary preaching, William Willimon, informed by yet another giant, Walter Bruggeman. Fifteen years ago, right after the turn of the millennium, before 9/11 or the war in Iraq, Willimon talks about how “we live in a time of dislocation, of disenfranchisement and loss.” An age of exile when “we sense in our bones that an old order is passing. Something is being dismantled, dissolved...old certitudes seem not so certain...” Fifteen years ago. Almost a generation. And it still feels like that. Even more so than in 2,000.

Maybe our world isn’t so different from that of Jeremiah or of Jesus or of Luke’s people. Different power structures, for sure. But human beings seem to have gotten things so wrong over and over and over again whether in Israel being invaded by Assyria who carries them off to exile in Babylon; whether Jerusalem where the Temple and religious life as the Jewish people knew it are demolished by the Roman Empire. By our broader, more global world where there are such disparities in power and wealth as to produce desperation and all the pain, anger, and violence that results when there is so little left to lose. This is not the world that reflects God’s promise – God’s dream for humanity of justice and peace and love. There is a big gap there. There is a gap between what is and what we wish for. And, I would guess, there is also a gap between what we wish for and what God wishes for us.

I'm sorry if you were hoping for a more upbeat message this morning! Stay with me, though. There is more to the message. Prophets like Jeremiah – and certainly Jesus – are not fortune tellers who predict the future. They speak out and tell what the reality is. And they also speak words of hope. For Jeremiah's people there will be a return from exile and God's promise of a righteous leader will be fulfilled. Jesus says that these signs, this dislocation are indications of the coming of redemption, of a new thing. God still reigns and is at work in the world. The new thing will probably not be a return to some imagined structure or system that we enjoyed. And there may be much more pain and dismantling to come. But Jesus does use the image of the fig tree – a living thing that blooms each spring. An image not of an end but a new beginning.

Advent is a good season for this. Our songs and readings tell us that those walking in darkness shall see a great light. They are not just talking about the light that comes with the birth of Jesus. Oh, of course, it is that. And it is more. It is the glimpses of light that hint at the fulfillment of God's kingdom that we look toward, yearn for. In Advent, we wait, we anticipate, we live in expectation – not in terror but in confidence that God is faithful and working in our world. How do we wait? In Hebrew, the word "wait" is related to "hope." So we live in hope. We look for those places where we see justice – justice not just for ourselves but especially for others. For all. We participate in bringing about God's Shalom by being in right relationship with God and others. We come out from behind our walls of comfort and safety and stand with those who are needy and oppressed – even if it is painful.

Barbara Crafton, a writer and Episcopal Priest who some of us met at Grace Freeport a year or so ago, says this beautifully (as she always does):

...each age has looked with dread at its own sorrows as it read these texts, and thought "This means us, personally, right now".... As violent an end as our projects may have here on the earth, the process in which we are involved is one of life. We are not dying. We're being born.

She describes the budding of a tree, the birth of its new leaves: [it] is a more violent process than we think -- we are so excited about spring coming that we don't notice how painful the buds of leaves can look at first. They poke their way through the carapace of bark that covers and protects the branch. They swell under the bark, which thins and softens in response to the pressure. They create blisters on the branch, stretched tight to contain the growing bud within. And then they burst through it. Sometimes they are red as blood, inflamed-looking.

Oh, the beginnings and endings of things! If we knew how fierce it all was, we would never make a start. Our mothers' wombs would be crowded with babies unwilling to leave, our gardens with seed unwilling to burst apart and set free the tiny green within....And here is Jesus, talking about summer leaves. Don't be afraid, he says, fearsome as it all is. There is a hand guiding you. Your progress is certain if you keep walking, for you do not walk alone. Many have made this walk; look to their experience and learn from it. I have made this walk; trust me.

Amen.

