

Year C Advent 1 Luke 21:25-36

This Gospel we have just heard is most definitely what you would call, “Apocalyptic literature.” Jesus is talking about signs that will be seen in the sun, the moon, the stars. The nations are afraid of what is coming. It sounds like a whole lot of destruction is coming for Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away.”

It may be hard to believe but, this is good news. To wrap our heads around this good news we need to refresh our memories on what an apocalypse is and is not. This will hopefully sound familiar to many of you but it bears repeating – it is very important to our understanding of our salvation.

In modern use, the word “apocalypse” is used to refer to the end of the world, usually also implying that something really horrible will happen to cause the end of the world. This is actually a distortion of the original meaning, a distortion that has occurred over the centuries. Apocalypse is a Greek word that means “revelation” or “disclosure”. It refers to the lifting of the veil between heaven and earth to reveal God and God’s plan for the world. Apocalyptic writing uses symbolic imagery – usually of animals and numbers – to talk about not the end of the world, but the end of history. As I have said before, there is a big difference.

Jewish people believed that their present age would suddenly end with the coming of God’s kingdom ushering in a new perfect age. When Jesus came along, his followers realized that Jesus had brought God’s kingdom and yet the present, evil age was still continuing. The two ages were continuing along together. And so Jesus’ followers spoke and wrote of the time when those two histories would no longer be continuing together – the current imperfect age would end and only God’s age will continue – God’s kingdom would be fully revealed here on earth and a new perfect history would

be recorded from that time onward. That's an apocalypse – the final and complete revelation of God's kingdom – and that's what Jesus is referring to today.

But, in order for God's kingdom to be fully revealed on earth, for God's kingdom to truly be on earth as in heaven, there is an awful lot of brokenness in our world that needs to be healed, a lot of evil that needs to be purged, a lot of hearts that need to be changed. In short, there is a lot of work to do. This changing of hearts, this purging of evil, this healing of the brokenness that must be accomplished by God is described in apocalyptic literature through destructive imagery of earthquakes, famines, floods, and fire.

But this isn't aimed at the destruction of the whole world and all civilization, only that which has turned from God, been irredeemably tainted with systemic evil. It is important to note who is afraid of the signs Jesus speaks of today. We are told the "nations" will be distressed, they will be filled with fear and foreboding. Throughout Scripture – in the prophets, in the psalms, and in the Book of Revelation, the word "nations" is used to refer to those who are not the people of God, those who, despite repeated invitations, are utterly wicked and will not change their ways, will not turn to God. They are the ones who Jesus tells us are afraid of what is coming upon the world.

A little knowledge of Greek helps us better understand what Jesus is talking about when it sounds like he is talking about the destruction of the world. The Greek word used here is not the usual one used to refer to the world – *kosmos*. That one is familiar to us. The word used is *oikoumene*, which has the more specific sense of the political and economic realm and sometimes signifies the Roman Empire. And what about the "powers of the heavens?" The powers of the heavens will be shaken Jesus says. Jesus is not talking here about heaven – God's abode. He is referencing "the heavens" which, in those days, meant the in-between place, the skies closer to the earth. This space

was inhabited by malevolent spirits associated with earth and with Satan not with God and with “Heaven.” These evil spirits are the ones who will be shaken.

It is difficult to describe in human language what our God will do to purge his creation of evil. As Bishop N.T Wright explains, God must take “drastic action to purify the world, to cut it back as one would with a tree that had become dangerously diseased, removing the deadly cancer so that the rest may be saved. [Jesus is talking today] of the necessary work of radically upsetting the human systems by which millions had been enslaved and degraded, but which were kept in place by structures of apparent beauty, nobility and high culture. A little modification will not be enough [to rid the world of systemic evil]. Only major surgery will do” (Wright, Study of Revelation, 53). “Heaven and earth will pass away” during this surgery, Jesus tells us. Later, in the Book of Revelation, we learn that a new heaven and a new earth will replace the old. Not that heaven and earth will be obliterated and replaced. Jesus is talking about the renewal of the earth, the transformation of the earth into a new creation just as we have been made a new creation, putting on Christ in our baptisms. Heaven and earth will be made new by abolishing all that is broken. To return again to N.T. Wright, he writes that God will cleanse all creation from “the horrible, disgusting, and tragic effects of human sin” (p.116).

To sum up, those listening to Jesus’ words hear him say God will deal with the unrepentant wicked who are currently prospering. God will tear down the corrupt and oppressive political and economic systems that are enabling those wicked to prosper. God will shake up all the manifestations of evil in the world and they will lose their power. Apocalyptic literature, like we hear today, is a beacon of hope to the pushed down, to the stomped on, to the pushed aside. It is a beacon of hope to those like us

who wait for God to fully reveal his kingdom, to heal the brokenness and leave nothing but beautiful perfection.

Jesus' words are an inspiring call to persevere. We do not wait in vain. We know, Jesus says, we know the kingdom is near. Stand up tall, he tells us, and raise your heads. Our redemption is drawing near.

Luke makes it clear that we live in an in-between time – in between the coming of Christ in the flesh and his triumph over death and the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time and his triumph over all the powers of earth and heaven. This “in-between time,” is not an easy time. It is tempting to despair when we look around and it feels like the perfection of God's kingdom will never come to be. But Jesus is the ultimate spoiler today. He has told us the end of our story – he has revealed the ending to the great Story of Salvation and it is very good news. Way back in elementary school when we were first being taught how to write our own short stories, the teacher told us that every story has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. The middle contains the climax of the story – the big event that resolves the problem – and then the remainder of the book is the ending, when all of the loose ends are tied up and we head toward the final words, “And they lived happily ever after.” We have had the middle of the story – we've had the big event that resolves the problem...Jesus was crucified, defeated the power of sin and death, and rose to new life, never to die again. We've had the big event and now we are living the ending, the time when all things are moving toward the final perfection.

And so, even though the world is still very much broken, Advent is the deliberate and focused time when we are reminded that we know the ending and we are heading toward it. Advent is our reminder to live in hope amid the brokenness that is being healed. Our story has been secured by Christ.

Today's story makes it clear that we cannot know now when the time will be for the full revelation of God's kingdom but we will know when it arrives. In the meantime, Jesus stresses that it is important how we live. We are free to struggle, to wait, to work, to witness — indeed to live and die — with hope because we know the end of the story. But this is not a passive time of waiting for us. We are not simply hearers or readers of the Story. We are in the Story, living the Story. Together we are Christ's body and that means we are collaborators with him, guided by the Holy Spirit, bringing the kingdom to its perfection. "Stand up and raise your heads", Jesus tells us. Standing up and raising our heads means being able to look around, to see our brokenness, to see the world's brokenness, and to hear what God is telling us to do about it, and then do it.

"From Moses to Martin Luther King, Jr., history is full of examples of those who, because they had been to the mountaintop, had peered into the promised land, and had heard and believed the promise of a better future, found the challenges of the present not only endurable, but hopeful. We, too, amid the very real setbacks, disappointments, or worries of this life" (Working Preacher, David Lose) hear Jesus' promise that our redemption is near and are filled with hope. Let that hope give us the strength to stand up and raise our heads.