

Year C Advent 1 Stand Up and Raise Our Heads Luke 21 vv25 to 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, and 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 know just exactly what Jesus means when he says things like, “Heaven and earth will pass away” and we need to refresh our memories on what an apocalypse is and is not. This is going to sound familiar to many of you but it bears repeating – it is very important to our understanding of our salvation.

So, if I had asked you a few months back, to give me a definition of the word, “apocalypse” you’d have likely told me something like the apocalypse is the time when God will destroy the earth with war and earthquakes and fire. But, now you know that “apocalypse” is a Greek word that means “revelation” or “disclosure”. It literally means “to remove the cover” (*apo – kalupto*). It refers to the lifting of the veil between heaven and earth to reveal God and God’s plan for the world. That plan is, of course, to unite heaven and earth, to fully establish God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven. 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.

The thinking was that this end of the broken time, known as the Day of the Lord, when heaven and earth would be completely united as one, would happen in one big sweep of God’s hand – whatever that would look like. It would be a day, or just a few days, and God would purge evil and heal the world of brokenness. When Jesus came along, his followers realized that Jesus had brought God’s kingdom and yet the present, evil

age was still continuing. 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. That's what Jesus is describing today.

Trying to describe, in human thinking, what the purging of evil and healing of the brokenness will look like is near impossible. We cannot fathom God's ways. Talk of earthquakes and fires sounds very frightening but this was simply an attempt to describe the end of the broken age using imagery that was popular at that time. This imagery doesn't always mean what we, now, might think it means. For example, the image of fire is often used but in the sense of clearing away the old and revealing the goodness that remains. Farmers burning their fields in the springtime are ridding the land of the old grass and leftover crops but they certainly are not destroying the land. With their fires, they are creating the conditions for new life. This is the process being described for us today – how God will create the conditions for new life in the fullness of God's kingdom. Just to be sure that we know that the whole world is not going to be destroyed, Jesus tells us that the heavens and earth will “pass away” – which might sound bad in our ears but it does not mean the world will end. “Pass away” (*parerchomai*) means the passing of time, and events, and conditions. It's like watching the world pass by your window as you ride in a car or bus. Things are continuously changing. His words will never pass by, Jesus says. His words will remain true. God will do what God has promised to do. That is most definitely good news. There's more good news for us as well.

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. We’ve talked a few times about the Greek word, often used by John – like last week – the word “kosmos” which means the ordered world, the human-made institutions, organizations, and beliefs added onto God’s good creation. The word Jesus first uses today, when he says that people will faint from fear of what is coming upon the world, is even more specific than *kosmos*. “World” here is *oikoumene*, the inhabited world, which has the more specific sense of the political and economic realm and, in the New Testament, signifies the Roman Empire because for them the Roman Empire was the whole inhabited world. Jesus reinforces exactly who he is talking about – those who need to be afraid of the coming fulness of God’s kingdom – a bit later when he says God’s massive overhaul, “will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.” What the original hearers heard is that God’s overhaul will come upon all who sit enthroned on the soil. For me, that again paints the target most squarely on those who gather worldly power unto themselves and “lord it over others” as Jesus says elsewhere. We cannot be comfortable, though, and think that we are 100% in the clear. There are many who call themselves followers of Christ who, in reality, do not live according to God’s ways. There are those people who do not understand that, as Harold Percy writes, “the Bible challenges the basic assumptions and reigning values of our culture” and we must learn “what it means to be the people of God” (p.35-6 of

Your Church Can Thrive). Percy advises the leaders of congregations to teach the people “that the good news is about the kingdom of God and about reconciliation with God...Teach them,” he says, “that the gospel is an invitation for us to choose God’s kingdom over against all the other voices and powers that call for our allegiance. Through Jesus Christ we are invited to be reconciled to God and to enter God’s kingdom. Christian discipleship,” he stresses over and over, “is about learning to live the life of God’s kingdom” (p.40). We are to proclaim and to show God’s kingdom to the world in contrast to the world’s kingdoms and values.

So, as N.T. Wright tells us, the world is going to undergo major surgery to remove the bad parts, heal the brokenness, and reveal all that is good. Those who trust and rely on God, who constantly work at living lives of abundant generosity, radical welcome according to God’s ways can stand tall and raise their heads with nothing to fear. Although this is very good news, there is still more good news.

Jesus, in words confusing to us maybe, tells his listeners that they will not pass away until all these things have taken place. How can this be? We’re still waiting for the perfection. Well...more Greek for you...What Jesus says is that these things are started with no reference to their finish [he uses the aorist tense of the verb]. Jesus brought the kingdom and, through his death and resurrection “opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers” (from the Te Deum). In the mystery of baptism, we participate in his death and resurrection, we are clothed in Christ’s righteousness, given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we enter into God’s kingdom, reconciled, a child of God, a member of the body of Christ.

We are living through the process of what Jesus said he started in the time of that generation he was speaking to then. We are living through the process of the coming fullness of God’s kingdom. So, 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 bringing the end of the broken age and the perfect union of earth and heaven. This “in-between time,” is not an easy time. It is the “birth pang” stage as we heard a couple weeks ago. 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 gives us 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. 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.

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 the importance of 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 doesn’t just mean we can be confident and unafraid. It also 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, they found the challenges of the present not only endurable, but hopeful. We, too, amid the very real setbacks, disappointments, and worries of this life” (Working Preacher, David Lose) hear Jesus’ promise that our redemption is near and we are filled with hope. Let us let that hope give us the strength to stand up and raise our heads.