

C Advent 1 12.2.18

Luke 21:25-36

Focus Statement: Jesus changes the story.

I had to drive up to Mt. Pleasant this week for a meeting with the synod outreach committee that handles our grant funding. As David probably knows, north of Lansing is out of the Michigan Radio listening area, so as I was driving back I was listening to a podcast interview with physician Rachel Naomi Remen. Dr. Remen was telling a story about how her grandmother had grown up under oppression as a Jew in Soviet Russia. As a response to the hunger she'd experienced in her childhood, her grandmother's refrigerator was always stocked to the gills. So much so, that if you weren't careful when you opened the door, an egg would tumble out and break on the kitchen floor. And whenever this happened, her grandmother would always smile slyly and remark, "tonight, we'll have sponge cake." Now, I confess I don't completely understand how the broken egg ended up as sponge cake, if she was scrapping it off the floor or what, but the point of the story was concerned as her grandmother was about not having enough to eat, a broken egg wasn't a reason to be sad, it was an opportunity to make a cake. Dr. Remen then went on to share how she never met her grandmother, who died before she was born. But when she was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease at fifteen and told she probably wouldn't live past forty, her mother put her arms around her and said, "we'll make a sponge cake. We don't know the recipe yet, but we'll figure it out, and we'll make a sponge cake." Her whole life, Dr. Remen said, has been figuring out the recipe for how to turn the broken egg of her diagnosis, and other broken eggs along the way, into sponge cake.

So it's the first Sunday of Advent, and Advent always starts with these really strange and scary texts about how "there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars... [and] People will faint with fear and foreboding... for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." This proclamation from Jesus comes right on the heels of the reading we heard two weeks ago about how the Temple, believed to be the dwelling place of God on earth, would be torn down, not a stone left on stone. Now, we can argue all day if Jesus' words here were literally or metaphorical, and what events he was precisely referring to, and my read is probably the truth is closer to a bit of both, but really none of that matters. What matters is Jesus' words here are frightening, and they were meant to be frightening. To put this in context, we're reading it in early December, but this story happened a couple days before the Passover. In just a day or so, the disciples will watch Jesus arrested by a crowd in the garden, handed over to Pilate, tried in a sham court, beaten, mocked, and hung on a cross to die. The disciples were headed into a dark and scary time, for they were about to see the powers of heaven not just shaken, but destroyed. Betrayed, killed, and left in a tomb for dead. And death, as we all know, is the end. There's no coming back from death. There is no way to turn that egg into cake.

But at the end of all these dire predictions of peril and destruction, Jesus went on, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Let me read that again. "Now when these things begin to take place." These things, remember, being, "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations;" "wars and rumors of war," "Jerusalem surrounded by armies... they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives...and

Jerusalem will be trampled on.” When all “these things begin to take place, stand up and raise up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” I’ve never actually been to war, but I’m pretty sure that when you are in peril the thing you are not supposed to do is to “stand up and raise up your heads,” because that is going to increase the likelihood that you will get shot, but that is exactly what Jesus told the disciples to do, “because your redemption is drawing near.”

What Jesus is telling the disciples here, has been telling them throughout this whole section, is to not trust their eyes, because what they think they see, what they think they understand, is not the full story, it’s only a part. “Many will come in my name and say I am he,” and promise you safety, “and they will lead many astray,” do not trust them. “There will be wars and rumors of war,” do not trust them. “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars... and people will faint from fear and foreboding,” but you, you don’t need to faint, and you don’t need to fear. Instead, you are to “stand up and raise up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The amazing thing about Christianity, about this faith we claim, about this God we follow, is that entering into the Kingdom of God is the experience of having everything we’ve thought to be true, everything the world has told us to expect, turned upside down. All Advent we wait for the coming of a great and powerful king, and we are given a refugee baby born to an unwed teenage mother and a reluctant fill-in father. The manger scene would be the least powerful image imaginable, except what is more powerful, what is more fierce, what is more permanent, than a parent’s love for a child. And what turns over your expectations,

upends your understanding, takes over your existence, and shows you a love deeper, fuller, and more completely than you ever imagined, than a baby.

Then that baby grew up, gathered a rag-tag band of fishermen and tax collectors, and set out on a ministry among the poor and suffering. Crowds gathered in his wake, crowds of the hungry, the hurting, the sick, and the poor. He passed over the wealthy and powerful to break bread with sinners and prostitutes. He entered Jerusalem on a donkey, a farce of the imperial parades of the powerful, and he died the death of a political prisoner, hung on a cross between two common thieves, robed in purple, the color of royalty, a crown of thorns on his head, under a sign that mockingly read, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." But mockery or not, it was true that he was, that he is king, not just of the Jews but of the whole of the universe. As Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians, "for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Don't trust your eyes, Jesus told the disciples, Jesus tells us. Don't trust your eyes, don't trust your wisdom, don't trust your fear. Trust only this: The Kingdom of God is the unexpected reversal of all you knew. The powerful will be laid low, and the lowly will be lifted up. If it looks like the end, it is not the end, it is only the beginning of what is to come. So stand up, raise up your heads, for your redemption is near. Amen.