

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“When the End is the Beginning”

Luke 21: 25-34

November 30, 2003

Today is the first Sunday in a new Church Year. We start over today and tell the old, old story to one another... again. This is what the Church (big and historical C) has taught us to do.

And it's a very strange thing the Church has us doing via the Lectionary. Every year, on the first Sunday of Advent, we're told the end of the story. We read texts that are about the Second Coming of Jesus and about the end of times.

It's an odd thing because most of us have already begun to “make merry”
and string some Christmas lights
and do some shopping
and schedule Christmas parties
and all that.

And then we come to church and right off the bat we hear Jesus doing Ebenezer Scrooge and talking about **“nations in anguish and men fainting.”**

It's a real “hum-bug” thing to do to us.

It's also a strange thing because it's like a novelist spilling the beans on the first page and telling you how the whole story ends. **“Once upon a time there was a world that goes through some trauma, gets judged and finally lives happily ever after.”** That's what we hear first.

Before we hear about angels breaking the news to Mary and Joseph and shepherds bowing before baby Jesus and Wise Guys making a trip, we hear about the world experiencing great trauma and Jesus coming back to bring an end to this world as we know it.

Welcome to the first Sunday in Advent. Where the new beginning is actually and end... or is it the other way around? T.S. Elliot wrote, **“What we call the beginning is often the end and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”**

The new year for us as Christians starts when ??? “in the bleak mid-winter.”
It begins for us ... as the days get shorter and the darkness grows longer.
Warmth goes away.

Leaves fall to ground.

Limbs lose the battle.

They give way to gray and the grass goes dull brown. Everything is ending and we say to one another, **“Time to begin again.”** The end is where we start from.

Luke tells us that at his own end Jesus was thinking of and seeing “the end.” Who knows what he was perceiving and what all he was aware of? I do believe there are prophetic moments for all of us but especially for spiritually advanced persons when the wall between this world and that is more of a membrane... a translucent veil.

You might picture Jesus as living that way most of the time. He can glimpse another world through the veil that is beyond time and space... beyond history.

This happens to us...

It happens to us mostly when we're asleep...

when we're relaxed finally
and not in control...

we dream.

And sometimes we remember our dreams and we know they are speaking something to us about life and self and maybe the world. Picture Jesus as living that way even as he is awake.

And especially as he is stressed and as his death is near.

Stress also activates our spiritual senses...
creative capacities.

Who knows what Jesus was perceiving that day as he started teaching? What we do have is what he was saying. How he tried to say what he saw.

He used a language we call apocalyptic. It's language usually reserved for the worst of times and for those who are really taking it on the chin. It's code language. It's the mystical, metaphorical, symbolic language of revelation. The word apocalypse means revelation or unveiling. Although when I hear it things don't seem to be all that "unveiled" if you know what I mean.

That's the kind of talk going on there in Luke 21. Jesus is standing with one foot in this realm and the other foot in a realm beyond and when he talks from that dual perspective, this is what it sounds like. It's strange... "**son of man in a cloud**" talk.

I don't know how you've felt about that kind of talk along the way... these passages that seem to say it's all going to end sooner or later... And that Jesus is going to usher in something new. And evil will finally get all that's coming to it.

Honestly, I've never been all that interested. Even back when Hal Lindsey's Late Great Planet Earth was a best seller. I was having way too much fun playing Jr. High football and meeting girls at the skating rink to be looking for the Second Coming.

And even now, as messed up as the world is in some ways, there's also so much beauty and goodness that I really don't get folks who get caught up in thinking about a Second Coming.

And given all Jesus said and taught, the topic of the future was not a real big deal. He only spoke of it a couple of times... But... he did speak of it... an ultimate kind of redemption that will "**draw nigh**" to us... to all creation... someday.

Jesus tells us the end of the story... that your story and my story, history's story, is set within God's story and within God's purpose. History is going somewhere and it is going towards God.

This is the destiny of it all...

The cosmic truth...

The last paragraph in the novel...

The details of it, especially regarding when and what, mind you, aren't clear at all. Nothing much has been unveiled... only the "who" part of it all. On the last page, at the conclusion of "The Greatest Story Ever Told," there is God.

And... that is the ending, which is our beginning. It is the largest truth there is to tell. And we tell it first before anything else. **"In the beginning, God... in the end, God."**

This is the cosmic truth... And my contention always is that the cosmic truth will be incarnate truth along the way. What ever is true... **"out there and up there and beyond here"** ... will find it's way into our lives and our stories. It'll be a part of history.

In other words, there is a cross and an empty tomb because in the very fabric of the universe all death leads to life.

There is a tiny baby in a simple manger because the love that is written into life itself is love that always goes to the other and joins them.

In today's text Jesus tells us of an end... an eschaton... which is the cosmic truth about the future. Christ will come again and in the process and surrounding it, apparently it's going to seem like the world as we have known it is about to fall apart.

"Heavenly bodies shaking...

Nations perplexed...

The sea in an uproar..."

Scary stuff to be sure. It's as if a movement in God's being causes movement in the creation. God thinks and creation reacts. Big, universal truth, happening in our little oceans and in our small history.

I don't know what else to say about this cosmic someday, this eschaton, other than that. The God beyond us will be the God among us again and when that happens history and life will change. We know how the story ends. Beyond that... the rest of the speculation about the eschaton is basically just an attempt at scaring people into faith and a good way of selling lots of books.

What is worth saying and saying and proclaiming loudly today is that what is true at that largest level will also be true in your life.

So... when all heck breaks loose...

when it seems like your world is shaking...

nothing is the way you thought it was...

and the end seems to be near...

Then look up... your redemption is likely to be at hand. God may be shaking your world up... or maybe it's just life being life... but either way these disturbances are God's fig blossoms. As Jesus says, **"These are the signs that the Kingdom of God is near."**

We should not be surprised that a little chaos is going to precede God's coming... and God's creativity. Page one of the Biblical Story is all about God speaking a creative word into chaos. This is the Divine's preferred circumstance for doing new things.

We shouldn't be surprised at all that things need to be shaken up. Who's going to be open to something newer and truer if everything's just fine in their backyard. But

send a ripple through life that throws you off balance and now... now you're looking for some new way to make life work. **"These crazy things are signs that the Kingdom is near."**

Something is about to be unveiled...
that's the way this chaotic episode ends.
And it helps to know that, doesn't it...
that the end is going to be a beginning?
We don't have to be so afraid.
The coming of Christ...
First time, second time, one millionth time...
is nothing to fear.

That's why Jesus says **"stand up and lift your head."** Our instinct is to duck and cover... maybe cower before the chaos of life. Jesus has told us that the chaos means something else... **"it's not just chaos..."** and now's the time to really pay attention and look for the Advent of God. **"Raise your head... look for what is beyond you... on the horizon."**

"And be careful..." That's the other thing Jesus says. **"Don't let your hearts get heavy with dullness or anxiety. If that happens, this day *that could and should be liberating* can close on you like a trap."** The chaos, rather than ushering in something new, can become your prison. Jesus tells us to be careful not to let that happen. **"Don't get all weighed down with worry or with boredom either one."**

Jesus has really helped me here in Luke 21, which really is as strange and as frightening a chapter as you'll find in the gospels... wars and revolutions and earthquakes and famines and pestilence. That just sounds scary doesn't it? **"Pestilence."**

He's being honest about the way of the world... and he's in touch with something else, he's connected to something beyond. He wants to help his followers deal with the pestilence and anticipate what's beyond it. Keep your heads up and your hearts light.

Isn't that good? It helps me, whether I'm thinking about some disturbance that comes into my life or that grand disturbance that one day interrupts all of life at the end of time... Jesus really has helped me.

I have two tasks.

One is to keep my head up... seeing with the eyes of hope.
and the other is to keep my heart light... freed up.

That's really different from what you hear from some folks. The message seems to be **"get all in a panic and obsessive and read books and make charts... and predict and fret and fear about who's left behind or what pestilence is right behind you'."**

No... no... Just keep your head up and your heart light. And you can do that because you do know the end of the story... which of course is always the beginning of another.

Amen.

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