

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Chastened Hope

Luke 21:25-36

Nov 28, 2021

Those of you who have been around the Advent bend more than a few times already know what to expect on the 1st Sunday of Advent, and more or less the 2nd Sunday, and to some extent the 3rd Sunday. And you know what not to expect. You know not to expect sweet baby Jesus in the manger, not yet anyways. You know already Advent doesn't arrive with candy canes and silver bells, and it's not at all beginning to look at lot like Christmas.

Yet you also know that it *is*, it is beginning to look at lot like Christmas. It is around town, and in all the stores, and goodness, look around here. This is beautiful; it is beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

But the scripture readings don't seem to know anything about any of that. And that's why it can be awfully disorienting, especially if you're *not* one of the people who have been around the Advent bend in church a few times before now. On the 1st Sunday of Advent, our eyes see joy, but our ears hear danger. Our eyes see light, but the scriptures seem to point toward darkness. Our eyes see "whee;" our ears hear "woah". You'd be forgiven, not just forgiven, you'd be totally understood if you're head-scratching about what's going on here.

Advent is from an old word that means "coming." in the church, Advent is a season of four weeks before Christmas during which we look for the coming and comings of God. At root of this is the belief in a God who comes to us. And doesn't ask us when. To prepare for God to come is to be ready, alert, awake. We prepare our spirits, which sometimes means getting rid, as much as we can, of all the other stuff we cram in our lives so that we can get back to the simple center of our lives in Christ in preparation for the festival of his coming in the incarnation at Bethlehem. Advent points us in that direction in some ways with wide-eyed wonder and sometimes with stark warnings. The stark warning is what we hear today.

Luke's Gospel chapter 21 reads like the end of all life: 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. It is an unravelling of Genesis 1, and all creation with it. In Genesis' first chapter, Creation comes into being: the sun and moon give their lights, God's Spirit hovers over the chaotic waves of the sea. God's Word, God's Logos is putting everything in place, everything in order.

Here, in Luke 21, Jesus' own words, is an apocalyptic vision of it all coming apart: sun, moon, stars fall; seas roar; waves crash. Understandably, people are in travail with all creation: they faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. The heavens and earth are shaken.

What do we make of this opening Sunday of Advent? As those of you who've been around Advent know, we begin each year with readings like this. Advent begins in the dark and in the darkness, with fear and trembling. In Advent, we begin with a vision of suffering.

It seems so jolting if we're not ready for it, to confront apocalyptic sayings like this at a time of year that paints suffering on a cosmic canvas of heaven and earth. The Bible isn't shy about that at all. For those who live, death is only a breath away; for those who rule, their downfall may be near. But for those who suffer, or who are far from home, those in slavery, in exile, in poverty, their redeemer is coming. Preeminent Bible scholar Ellen Davis was asked where she finds optimism in scripture. She replied, "There's not a page in the Bible that says we should be optimistic, but every page in the Bible has chastened hope."

The difference between optimism and chastened hope is foundational if it is not always obvious. In his book *Moses in Pharaoh's House*, Fr. John Markey insists that we understand the distinction between the two. He says that American culture is run through with superficial optimism and wishful thinking. Optimism, Markey writes, "requires a positive attitude and a commitment to change for the better in the face of adversity." Those sound like good traits to me. "However," Markey also points out, "it also requires living in a stable, secure society in which the ordinary necessities of life (food, clothing, housing, education) are available to everyone. When life is difficult, a positive attitude is much more difficult to sustain. (64)."

What that means, I think, is that when things are going relatively well, it's hard to tell the difference in the morning between a person who gets out of bed with Christian hope and one who's morning latte is syruped with superficial optimism. But when everything falls apart, only one can sustain. Only hope endures in the face of serious trials. I think that's what our Luke reading is clarifying for us today. Luke's reading, Jesus' words, and its apocalyptic vision takes life and shakes it up, knocks it around, gives a picture of a life when everything has fallen apart, and then asks: now, what do you have? Because whatever you have now—after the earthquake, the hurricane, after the flood, after the divorce, after the failing semester, the layoff, the breakup. When the earth under your feet and the sky over your head come crashing in, what you have left is what you really had all along. You discover whether your spiritual house is built on solid rock of spiritual hope or the rickety scaffolding of superficial optimism. And Jesus says, "Heaven and earth may pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Words like, "Come to me all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

Like, "Go and sin no more."

Like, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

Like, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."

Words like, "I am with you always to the end of the age."

Everything in life may be circling the drain, but those words, those promises, that person, Jesus Christ, he is forever. Someone needs to hear that today.

Like thinks we all need to hear that today.

First Sunday of Advent clarifies from the very beginning what all of this is all about, these next four weeks of this season, the next 52 weeks of the church year, the untold days of our lives. Our faith isn't in a God who makes everything always go right for faithful people if they're just faithful enough. It's chastened hope in a God who is still there and there for us when our worlds fall apart. Or it is nothing at all. Deeply, the invitation to live in the light of Advent hope is God's invitation to enter the fullness of life right now and not be lulled asleep by ordinary life, wherein we are consumed with eating and drinking, buying and selling. All these ordinary things, while good in themselves, can lull us to sleep by keeping us from being truly attentive and grateful within our own lives.

Unfortunately, spiritual sleep-walking is the normal state for most people most of the time. In his book *Road to Daybreak*, Henri Nouwen writes of returning to his homeland Holland one Christmas season, and marveling that in one short generation the country had changed from being a very pious nation to becoming a secular one. He ponders this and says,

"Many reasons can be given. But it seems to me, from just looking around and meeting and speaking to people, that their captivating prosperity is one of the more obvious reasons. People are just very busy—eating, drinking, and going places... The Dutch have become a distracted people—very good, kind, and good-natured but caught in too much of everything. (From Ronald Allen, et al, *Preaching God's Transformative Justice*, Year B, p 2)

I have to wonder, if Nouwen was startled by the zombie-like Dutch culture "caught in too much of everything," what in the world would he say about our culture, which says too much of everything is never enough and we have ready access at our fingertips to countless, endless ways to numb ourselves from pain and also from true joy and ultimately from love of neighbor and finally, from actual life?

This is what Jesus cautioned about in Luke 21. Given the apocalyptic cosmic shakings he describes, you'd think he'd caution about losing hope. You'd think he'd say, "no matter what happens don't give up hope because your redemption is drawing near." All shall be well, a famous mystic said. You'd think Jesus would say something like that too. In your suffering, all shall be well so don't give up hope. Keep your chin up.

But he doesn't. He doesn't say, don't give up hope, keep your chin up. I think the reason why is that people are more resilient than they think they are. People find hope in the most desperate situations in their lives. I'm amazed at the stories of people fleeing their homes in this generation from Afghanistan or from El Salvador. This era will go down in history at the Great Global Migration. People who lose everything sometimes have a unique clarity about them to see God with them when everything else is stripped away.

Jesus is actually more concerned about people who are so overstuffed and distracted that they can't even begin to see what God is doing all around them and what God wants to do within them. Don't be distracted and dissipated by being caught up in the too-muchness of your busyness and consumption and entertainment and numbness. He describes this as being

weighed down. Think about that. We tend to think of material privilege as being liberated to be able to do what we want when we want. Jesus says, Nah, having too much is a millstone hung around your neck. Your *muchness* weighs you down. You are not free to be alert, to be awake, to keep watch, to walk with me. We remember the rich young ruler who went away sad because he had too much to let go of.

That doesn't mean that we should be people without hope. Far from it. And that's why we start here. Advent is celebrated kind of as a long-extended Christmas season with all the sweet, pretty things. No problem there. I don't want to be the dud at the Christmas party. But the better thing is remembering that Advent can also do its work in us as what the church calls a penitential season, a season sometimes with fasting and prayer and some silence and some spiritual discipline to begin to wake up. To have some solidarity with the suffering. Do some of that now, and you'll begin the year by seeing what you're made of.

You see what I mean? Isn't it just the thing we need to have clarity about what we're really made of, which in turn gives us clarity about God's grace? No gift under the tree can do that for you, but Advent can, if you let it. The season digs down to the root of our being, that which can't be papered over, or consumed over, or stuffed. It's your soul, your being, who you really are. Advent is an invitation to learn again who you are: your place in the world, your relationships with other people and in the web of creation; to remember the suffering others experience in the world today and give some relief when you can; to renew your spiritual disciplines of awakenings.

Advent is a time of starting over. Don't we need that, a time to start over and begin again.

None of us know today what this year holds in store for us, and the last two years has taught us to not even try to predict. But we know Christ will come. In this season, we anticipate the festival celebration of Christ's coming incarnate in the world, we also look to Christ's return to the world in glory, to redeem all creation. As we do, we keep watch for the places of Christ's coming all around. Christ says look for me in the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned. What you do for the least of these you do for me. I am there.

At the heart of Christian hope is the conviction that God has a plan for the universe and the power to carry it out. Hope is hope in God. Beyond a simplistic optimism that blindly wishes for something good to happen, hope depends on a God who redeems even the most terrible realities of human history and invites us to wake up and to participate in God's redemptive work in the world (from Markey, 67)."

And so today, on this day, we stand before God. before whom heaven and earth will pass away, but this hope will not pass away.