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First Presbyterian Church
December 2, 2018
Advent 1/Year C
Luke 21: 25-36

“Fear Not”

It’s the first Sunday of Advent. The stores have displayed Christmas decorations since Halloween. A local radio station has been playing Christmas carols since mid-November, and downtown Fort Wayne is all lit up!

If you’re hanging your stockings by the chimney with care and expected Christmas carols and nativity stories this morning, you may have had a rude awakening when you heard the New Testament reading from Luke about the end of the world. Perhaps you were expecting more of what the culture offers us, something along the lines of angels, shepherds, a cooing baby Jesus and a smiling Mary. Unfortunately, you’ll have to wait a little while longer for that.

Because in Advent, the lectionary hands-out our usual dose of end-of-the world passages on the first Sunday of Advent, which isn’t at all Christmasy or full of yuletide cheer is it now?!

I wouldn’t be honest with you if I didn’t admit that for me, and maybe for you, this is a very bizarre way to start the season. Hearing about distress among nations, the roaring of the sea, and people fainting from fear and foreboding is a story that, historically, I’ve dreaded and sometimes (truth be told) have skipped altogether. But the season of Advent demands a very different kind of preparation than the shopping malls and catalogs recommend. And on this first Sunday of Advent, the Luke reading sets a very different tone than the cultural Christmas season that surrounds us.

And I suppose we could be sorry about that, but then again, there’s something refreshingly honest in admitting that life isn’t always Instagram worthy. And sometimes the world, even with gorgeous twinkling Christmas lights, is fragile and falling apart.

American novelist Flannery O’Connor once wrote, “To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures.” That’s

precisely what Jesus does in his prophetic wake-up call. He shouts, he draws startling figures, and he uses every rhetorical device at his disposal to snap his listeners to attention. “Be on guard,” he warns his disciples. “Be alert.” “Stand up and raise your heads.” And look.

LOOK.

Friends, when you look out at the world, what do you see?

Here’s what I saw from my office window as I wrote this sermon: I saw the courtyard trees decorated with Christmas ornaments containing people’s hopes and wishes, which is a festive sight. But I also saw a hearse carrying the body of a 21 year-old woman shot and killed on Thanksgiving night in our very own city. Some days when I look out my office window, I see business people walking down the sidewalk, perhaps on their way to lunch or work; but I also see people with considerably less means trying to get inside our sanctuary . . . perhaps looking for food or shelter. As I drive into work, I regularly see a busy drive through at the Starbucks at Jefferson and Fairfield, but I also see homeless people panhandling outside of it for food or money. In the neighborhood I live in, I see a whole lot of white people and almost no people of color.

That’s what I see; or don’t see, as the case may be.

What do you see?

Today, Jesus invites us to see the world as it is, which makes no sense, of course. The logical, prudent thing to do is to cower, to run for cover and keep our heads down, not up. Only heroes, the foolhardy, or the courageous see what others cannot see and raise their heads in such times.

I’ve certainly found myself among those who choose not to raise their heads. Years of avoiding passages like this from Luke and moving straight to angels and shepherds was a sure and certain way to avoid the messiness of Advent when all I wanted to do was jump straight to Christmas.

But then Sandy Hook happened, that dreaded school shooting 6 years ago this month. For me, that’s when Advent became real. Really real. And all sense of sanity about what’s right and wrong was tossed out the window of good sense. So I stopped avoiding these readings, because as much as I like Christmas, you have

to go through Advent to get there. *And Advent, as Fleming Rutledge reminds us, “begins in the dark. It’s not a season for the faint of heart.” Whether we like it or not, the invitation Advent offers us is hard-edged; and it doesn’t look pretty and it’s not what we find on greeting cards or even, for that matter, a baby shower invite . . . which is what most of us want during these Sundays of Advent.*

But instead we get anything but a positive birth experience. We get messy and confusing and scary which, if we’re being honest, is what most birth experiences are like, even the fourth time around. I speak from experience here.

But running scared is not what faithful people are called to do.

I’m often reminded during Advent and Lent that Jesus’ life begins and ends with the message to “Fear not”. The Angel Gabriel told it to Mary and the angels told it to the women at the tomb – fear not!

Why?

Because Jesus knew that as far back as Pharaoh to today’s despots, fear is what drives us inward, hardens our hearts, darkens our vision and stunts our imagination. Fear, and its corollaries: despair, disgust, and yes sometimes even hatred and rage, weigh us down. Fear makes us claim an “us versus them” world, which is death dealing at worst and paralyzing at its best.

Fear is a powerful motivator, my friends. Fear, in so many ways, is at the root of the great challenges we face: war, economic inequity, community unrest, prejudice, division . . . all of these have fear at their roots.

Murray Bowen was a psychiatrist and pioneer in the field of systems theory. Among his insights are the tendency of a system to resist change and our tendency to manage fear and anxiety about that change by focusing on a third party. This third party becomes a scapegoat for our anxiety, and we unfairly blame them for our problems. Often times these third parties have less power and prestige than we do.

Fear of the “other” leads us to unfairly blame others for **our** problems, and to act in ways that are inhumane.

Because fear is a motivator.

It paralyzes us, and causes us to say and do irrational things. Dare I say, unfaithful things.

Maybe that's why the Bible's most repeated phrase is "Fear not."

Because the writers knew it was hard to be both fearful and faithful.

And yet despite the admonition we seem to live these days at the intersection of fear and terror where darkness crowds around us. Why can God's voice not be heard among all the others? Isn't God supposed to be coming to make things right? Isn't that why we're here, celebrating? He came down that we may have love. He came down that we may have peace. He came down that we may have joy. Hallelujah forevermore? Why is God so quiet in very season we celebrate Christ's birth who, it might behoove us to remember, was born a refugee and forced to flee to Egypt with his parents when King Herod threatened to kill him?

So what do we do when we are bombarded with messages of fear, anxiety and hostility? Perhaps this might be a good time to ask the old question "What would Jesus do?" Well, Jesus tells us what to do. He tells us to stand up! Stand up, he says, and raise your heads!

This passage about the end of times which too many Christians take as their marching orders to hunker down in their bunker tells us to do just that opposite! Stand up, Jesus says. Stand up!

Stand up to the fear that drives wedges of distrust into our communities. Stand up to the fear that causes us to define ourselves and those around us not by what we have in common but by what makes us different. Stand up to the fear that creates an either/or and us/them mentality.

Stand up!

And so we are called to stand up to fear and everything that follows it: injustice, violence, and exclusionary practices, and instead advocate for the realm Jesus' births tries to usher in, the realm where peace is operative, and hospitality is practiced, and where fear of the Lord drives us more than fear of the Other.

In her latest book [Almost Everything: Notes on Hope](#), Anne Lamott reflects on her own journey these past few years and how it has affected her. I saw myself in her words; maybe you will too. She writes:

“Hate weighed me down and muddled my thinking. It isolated me and caused my shoulders to hunch, the opposite of sticking together and lifting our hands and eyes to the sky. The hunch changes our posture, because our shoulders slump, and it changes our vision as we scowl and paw the ground. So as a radical act we give up the hate and the hunch the best we can. We square our shoulders and list our gaze.” (Page 84)

Friends, too many things conspire to keep us from lifting our gaze and standing up, but when we do we see small, beautiful gestures.

As I left here on Friday I saw 4 Deacons getting food ready for the funeral reception of that young woman shot and killed, and I saw staff going out of their way to make our guests feel at home.

I saw someone taking a close-up picture of our wishing tree – and putting his hopes among the collection already there.

I see people taking angels from the Angel tree, therefore providing some joy for families who might not otherwise have any this Christmas.

I saw people yesterday surround a mother with love at her daughter’s funeral.

I see people visiting church friends in the hospital, offering a word of encouragement.

In these small examples, I’ve seen people lift their heads and stand up tall and resist the tide of discouragement, anger and fear that wants to catch hold of us. And in those moments, I see the promise of the coming Christ, and I know and believe with all my heart that peace will prevail over hatred and fear, because God, Emmanuel, is coming with light and love and hope and peace into our world. Our beautiful, fragile, and sometimes failing apart world.

Amen.

Sources:

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Robert Hoch, commentary on Luke 21 from www.workingpreacher.org, November 29, 2015

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