

Advent 1 Luke 21: 25-36

December 2, 2012

It's Advent again and the stores have been full of Christmas stuff for weeks.

In the church too, we are beginning our countdown to Christmas...thoughts turn to the manger, and we dust off the crèche and practice the carols.

The lectionary however gives us something very different. It begins this season with the end times...with a warning and a promise.

Listen to Luke. We're not preparing for a baby shower here. Whatever we're getting ready for, it's something big. Something the size of a galaxy... – or even a soul...or even bigger than that. This is calling on the discourse of chaos....the chaos over which the Spirit of God brooded at creation...the chaos which threatens to break out at every turn in this world, and in every generation...it's a tiger caged, ready at any moment to stick a tentative paw out for those who say "nice kitty" and once the paw is freed...the chaos returns, tooth and claw.

Advent is soul sized. It is no baby shower we're preparing for. Life and death are before us – time and eternity - and the time is now - and the cause is urgent. Advent says look around – there is WAY more going on here than you know. The past bleeds into the present and they both call forth the future in a way that blurs the whole thing until time is just – time. Not linear – almost cruciform.

Advent is asking us to look beyond and above and beneath...to the reality of what is truly happening, and then, even with everything we see once we truly see...even then

To have hope.

Yes there is chaos. There is a portal in the chaos, it seems to say. The portal is as it always was...the living Word of God, speaking into the void, a word of compassion and passion and life. New life. And more than anything else, hope.

You know the chaos. You know the void. Some of you are living it right now, personally. For all of us on this planet, the chaos is real and present, when we read the signs.

There's a certain way in which Luke urges patience in the midst... asking us to look up – not to be overcome by the void; it is real, but it is penultimate and partial. He urges us to take the long view...to realize that things as they are now will not always be this way....to see in the distance the hope that beckons. God will have the final word, and the final word will be a word of hope. Patience, he says. Patience.

But – he also holds out for us the urgency of the hour. That may seem like a paradox – urgent patience – and it is, but he is calling down for us a full portion of the stuff. Urgent patience. The stuff of Advent. An antidote to our culture's overindulgence in immediacy. An overindulgence in immediacy. (I find myself at the computer moaning about a slow connection.... "I'm wasting nano seconds here!" The compulsion

for the immediate is concerning and paralyzing at the same time, don't you find? Luke calls us to urgent patience. We're in this for the long haul.....but you don't just sit back, there's chaos to brood over! And you have to know what's what.

Look up he says. Look up.

See the big picture. See the signs. Don't get your head so far into yourown little world that you can't see what's happening and hear the sounds of the earth crying out for justice, for life. Look up.

You can see how nature works – how birthing happens, the harvest after the first green shoots. What if the present troubles were birth pangs, what if what we're seeing now were the green shoots from a tree everyone thinks is dead? What if you knew inside you that no matter how barren, how cold, how dark, the light and life and new growth would come? What if we gathered once a week to remind ourselves of that?

That's Advent. That's hope. Advent is first about hope. And that's exactly what we do today. We're holding out hope for one another and for a world that's forgotten how to hope.

Paulo Friere is a theologian who has written a book called Pedagogy of Hope – it's old now but well worth the read. As I understand him he says this:

Hope is born into us. It's human nature. We are hardwired for hope.

And hopelessness? That isn't lack of hope but rather hope gone bad.

Gone off the rails because of bad experience and lack of being grounded in something bigger than itself: in God.

Hope however, is never quite enough. Alone it doesn't win

But without it, any struggle to make my life or this world a better place will be weak and wobbly...a bit like this Jessie tree were it not grounded firmly in ...well....ground!

We need hope first, but to feed it we need act in hope. You need to do hopeful acts. Those increase your hope, which increases your hopeful acts, and so on and so on.

We have to educate one another, he says, in hope. First, what it is NOT. It is not naiveté, whistling in the dark, ignoring the pain around you and pretending nothing bad will ever happen. Not that.

Then what?

Today I'm remembering a hopeful act that happened 57 years ago. Dec 1, Montgomery Alabama. A woman left work and boarded a bus for home. She was tired, her feet hurt. As the bus became crowded, the woman, a black woman, was ordered to give up her seat to a white passenger. She did not. She did not. She stayed seated. That's all. That simple decision led to the disintegration of the system of segregation in the Southern United States. Her name was -

She was 42. She didn't plan it – she was tired, and tired of being treated that way. WHO KNOWS what small act of yours might have huge consequences? Who knows? Look up – take the long view – we just don't know what one simple action when times are shaky might do.

Hope. There are many more examples. I chose Rosa because Dec 1 is that anniversary. You might think too of the hopeful work done by Grandmothers' groups with respect to AIDS in Africa and so on...there are myriad signs of hope when we know how to read them.

(you've heard the story about the guy in the hotel room? Goes in, calls down to the front desk...I can't get out of here.....three doors one leads to the closet, one to the bathroom and the other one says do not disturb) you have to know how to read the signs.)

Sometimes when I am tempted to despair I think of the changes in attitudes over my lifetime. 58 years isn't young, but it's not that many years in the grand sweep of things. During my lifetime there have been huge changes in some things. Attitudes to things like seatbelts, smoking, and drunk driving for example. HUGE changes. I know they may seem small and very middle class but those are examples of how with public will, things can change not only for individuals but for society. We can look up and turn this around if we want to.

Some will say that for the planet that time has passed and everything else we do is just patching a garment that's already destined for the dump. I don't know what I believe about that.

But even if that is so, we still need to look up and look ourselves in the mirror every morning, and the best way to be blessed by what you see there is to live that message of urgent patience that calls to us from the pages of Luke. Like the Jesse tree, barren and small, but grounded in the stuff of this earth and carrying within it the promise of life, we are Advent people, comfortable in the dark of this season, looking up for signs of hope and life

And finding them, as it turns out, all around us.

Let's make Advent a verb.

May you practice hope, and may you Advent well. Heads up – there's more to come!