

“In the End is our Beginning”
Cynthia Lapp
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Hyattsville Mennonite Church

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-36

The apocalypse - I mean - Advent, is upon us once again. Each year on the first Sunday of advent the lectionary prescribes these words of Jesus about the end from one of the gospels. Advent is about preparing for the birth of Jesus so why all the scary stuff? We say we are preparing for Jesus' birth. But we are probably preparing for work parties and gift giving and musical events and creating significant memories. So why must we endure these warnings of terror?

from **The Message** – ²⁵It will seem like all hell has broken loose – sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

Texts like this are scary, even if we don't really believe that it is a prediction of the end of the world, even if we believe it is only a description of what could happen. It can still take us back to those terrifying hellfire sermons and movies that some of us endured in childhood. As frightened as we were back then, did it really make us alert and watchful for the workings of God in the world? If we are without fear today, do we have our eyes open for the way that Love is at work in the world?

At the end of Luke 21 from which we just read, the writer tells us that Jesus taught these things in the temple, day after day. At night he went to the Mount of Olives. During the day the people would flock to hear him preach at the temple. With stories of war, the prediction of the destruction of the temple and destruction of Jerusalem is it any wonder that the authorities got worried about him and his message?

In some ways Jesus was only describing the experience of living under the oppression of the Roman Empire. But for those who are in charge

of the empire, hearing their rule described in graphic, violent language like Jesus uses cannot be comforting. It is easy to see why Jesus got in trouble.

For those who know what it is like to live in fear and foreboding hearing their reality described is probably cathartic. The followers of Jesus know the terror of living under occupation and there is probably some consolation in hearing their experience named and depicted by a teacher they respect.

Many of us are trying to live counter to the present day empire in the United States. We have something in common with those who were listening to this message in Jesus' day. But we are not exactly like those early disciples. We are relatively wealthy and live in safety at least compared to Jesus and most of his followers. **We** are more like those who were secure in their place in the empire. Jesus had this to say to those who lived a more comfortable life.

³⁴“Be on guard lest your spirits become bloated with indulgence, drunkenness and worldly cares. That day will suddenly close in on you like a trap” – The Inclusive New Testament

In any era, there are plenty of ways to blot out the discrepancies and disease in life, in the neighborhood, in the news. Drunkenness is one way to cover up the anxiety but eating or shopping or just getting wrapped up in the details of life may be more likely for moderate Mennonites. Instead of trying to escape reality, instead of covering their eyes to the pain and destruction around them Jesus instructs his listeners to be alert, to keep watch. Be attentive and pray for the strength to escape the destruction. Jesus is saying, “If you close your eyes to the pain you might also miss your redemption.” Is Jesus saying, “Stay awake, something good might come out of all this horrible mess?”

Most of us have been protected from the roaring of the sea and waves Jesus mentions though we have seen from afar the anger and destruction in the tsunami and hurricanes in recent years. From a distance, to say that redemption can come out of this devastation seems gratuitous. It would be silly, not to mention insensitive, to say something like that. But Jesus knew what it was to be in the center of uncertainty. He camped out on the Mount of Olives every night. His message had him roaming the countryside often not knowing where his next meal would come from. An itinerant teacher

with sketchy future plans can get away with a message like “stay alert.” Coming from Jesus, a message like “your liberation is coming” has some bite.

If the memo for us is be on guard, the memo for those who are struggling with living on the edge is this promise:

³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

It is easy from our safe perches and porches to wonder at this message of comfort. As self sufficient and independent as we are, we are our own comforters. But we are deceived if we believe that we can go it alone, without each other or without an awareness of something larger than ourselves – call it cosmic love, or God.

The promise Jesus gives is that his teachings cannot be taken away. Love and justice and peace will always be there if we open our eyes to them. His words will not die. The writer of John’s gospel gives us, “In the beginning was the Word.” The Word has been from the beginning and Jesus says his words will never die. Jeremiah gives us a similar argument that God’s covenant is always there.

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

This is “natural law” according to the biblical writers: God will never break a promise. Love and justice and peace are forever. But it is a covenant which means we also need to do our part and stay alert to the possibilities. God does not work alone to bring justice, we are part of the equation.

So, why do we have to listen to *these* words as we prepare for that lovely manger scene a few weeks down the road. It is so sweet watching the children in the Christmas pageant. The stars shining, crowns wobbling, angels with tinsel halos. Why must we read about destruction – “distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the seas and the waves” and listen to grim scenarios – “people fainting from fear and foreboding.”

We are given these texts where Jesus seems to be describing the end and yet what we are looking toward is the beginning. Advent is the beginning of the liturgical church year. The birth of this baby is the beginning of a new way for those who follow him. We are heading into the darkest days here in the northern hemisphere and yet we are audacious enough to claim that this is a new beginning, here in the dark of winter.

What if these words of warning are also a description of a new beginning? They describe not only a time when we are tempted to check out because the poverty, pain and violence are all too much. This is also a description of a new beginning, a picture of the time when the empire has fallen and the oppressors are no longer in charge. Jeremiah proclaims:

¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Jesus also uses tree imagery.

Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

We hear this from TV preachers and Christian leaders seeking to save souls by their words. It is often in times of calamity. "These are the signs from God, this is what you were warned about. People, Be happy, the end is near."

But Jesus doesn't say the end is near, Jesus says:

²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

That doesn't sound like the end, that sounds like the beginning.

Each year, in this season of advent we are invited to look around, to again take time to see signs of the coming reign of God, to wonder if there are signs among us of the kingdom of God. We are one year closer than the last to these promises. As we approach the longest, darkest day of the year we are reminded that what looks like disaster may carry a seed of hope and grace. We rarely comprehend this while standing alone. The kingdom is about community after all. In working together we catch a glimpse of the justice that Jesus promises, of the liberation and redemption that is near.

May we stay alert this advent season to the possibilities of love and justice, of peace and reconciliation, among us and in the world. In the end is our beginning.