

Lord Have Mercy
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Psalm 25:1-10
I Thess. 3:9-13
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-36

It is Advent, again. We are given a gift in these four weeks. We are invited to open ourselves in a more conscious way, to wait and watch for the places we see Christ in the world, God born anew. And each year, we are given the gift of these apocalyptic texts from the gospels — with descriptions of anguish and distress.

Lord have mercy. I do not receive this gifts graciously. How I dread these apocalyptic texts.

So I laughed delightedly this week when I saw this post on Facebook.
WARNING: As of today, Facebook will automatically start dragging the Earth into the sun. To change this option go to Settings> planetary settings> trajectory then unclick the box that says Apocalypse.

Ah, how humanity has advanced. All we have to do is “unclick” the apocalypse. Those of a certain age have heard these apocalyptic descriptions in the gospels and learned to be scared because we are reading about “the end.” Or perhaps it is not our age or teachers, but our socio-economic status or culture that causes us to hear these texts as if it is the end of the world.

Granted, from the beginning of Luke 21, Jesus describes some terrifying things: earthquakes and famine, vengeance and betrayal, imprisonment, even death for some of his followers. But if we read this passage from Luke without the presuppositions, it

does not actually say that the world is coming to an end, though Jesus is describing the end of the temple and Jerusalem as his disciples know it.

We heard just the end of the chapter, which describes what we might today call global climate change; signs in the sun, moon and stars. Distress between countries that are confused by the roaring oceans and tidal waves. People fainting in fear. Even the powers of heaven are shaken.

But this is all to get people to pay attention, to stay alert because the real show is yet to start — the Chosen One is coming on a cloud in great glory.

This comes to us out of a particular historical context, with real connections to real people many, many years ago. But what it all means for us today is pretty mysterious, at least to me. With my limited understanding and perspective I want to turn this all into a metaphor (like the fig tree Jesus talks about next) — a metaphor for some big change happening — somewhere, sometime.

It is tempting as privileged, progressive Christians to approach the Bible metaphorically. Reading in this way shows that we are literate and somehow have a more complex and developed faith. But Jesus describes scenes like this one often enough that if we decide to follow the Facebook instructions and “unclick the box that says apocalypse” we are missing something.

Because depending on the context in which one reads this passage, it might very well sound like a description of reality. Imagine reading this text in a literal and immediate way, through the eyes and experience of people today in Congo or Palestine, Syria or Afghanistan where tragedy unfolds daily, hourly. Violent and senseless rape, stray bombs, drone aircraft, soldiers, rebel groups, nowhere to run, no

one to trust. Even the sun, moon and stars, those things that can always be depended upon. Even these seem to be failing. In this context, it is not the roaring sea that frightens people but oceans of innocent — and culpable — blood. It is the roaring blood that terrifies people to death.

We dare not unclick the apocalypse. We need to hear this text in church because this is not some fanatical prophecy about the future. It is a description of the present for our sisters and brothers across the globe as well as some people in our own city and neighborhoods.

If we unclick the apocalypse we miss the hope that comes next. Jesus says, “Lift up your head and look. Don’t hide in fear — look up and see that your redemption, your rescue, your liberation, is coming near.”

For those who live with terror every day, in floods of blood, to look up and see The Chosen One coming on a cloud of glory, this is a joyful, hopeful moment. The One who brings liberation is coming on a cloud, a vehicle that cannot be destroyed by drones or missiles. Indeed, heads are raised because freedom is close at hand. Some of us miss this part of the story, even though it is the climax. For hard workers, with heads full and hands busy, it is easy to miss — or dismiss — the signs: the sun, moon, stars, roaring waters. Maybe it doesn’t matter because those who understand themselves to be in control and hold the power surely don’t need liberation; they couldn’t possibly be bound tight or need to be freed from anything.

But just because the society in which we live is not in total chaos, like what we read about in Congo or Syria, doesn’t mean we breathe easy. We may have more control of our lives, but we can’t dismiss the real uncertainty, even fear that is part of

life: chronic illness, depression and anxiety, perhaps violence in our homes, financial stress, spiritual emptiness. If we are honest, we all have something from which we need to be redeemed. Perhaps it is precisely the control we believe will save us, from which we need to be freed.

This year, during advent, we are invited to look around us, to focus on those places that may be overwhelmed and flooded, and to find ways to allow God's flood of mercy to wash over and through. How do we find that safe zone, between the literal flood plain and the metaphorical mountain?

You probably know the one about the man who is caught in a great flood. A rescuer comes by in a boat and tells the man to get in. The man has been praying fervently for a miracle and he will not be deterred by this boat.

The man continues his prayers as the waters rise to his waist. Another boat comes by offering him a ride to safety, but the man refuses insisting that God will miraculously save him.

As the waters rise to his chin, a helicopter hovers overhead and lowers a rope ladder for the man. He shakes his head, adamant that if he is faithful God will provide a miracle. And then the water covers his mouth and nose and the man drowns.

The man sees the gates of heaven, and there is St. Peter. With his tattered and waterlogged faith, the man approaches St. Peter and tells him how disappointed and devastated he is that God did not provide a miracle and save his life. St. Peter looks at the man incredulously and says, "What do you mean? We sent two boats and a helicopter!"

There must be truth somewhere here: between believing that God will miraculously and personally save us from destruction and suspending all hope. As those who are invited to wait and watch for signs of God in the world we hear the words of Jeremiah:

“The days are surely coming when God will bestow all the promised blessings. God will raise up a righteous one who will bring justice and integrity to the land. In those days Judah will be safe and Jerusalem will be secure. The land will be called, “God is our justice.”

As followers of Jesus, we believe God does not leave us alone, that God did send one who brought justice and integrity. And now we are called to be the hands and feet of that one, that Christ.

What does it look like to become part of the flood of God’s mercy that gives hope to those who are up to their ears in mud?

There are as many ways as there are hands and feet in this huge body of Christ. As a congregation, one way we are living this out is through our weekly advent offering to Mennonite Disaster Service. MDS sends volunteers to areas that experience natural disasters. Mercy appears with buckets and mops, chainsaws and hammers. MDS was on the ground within days after Superstorm Sandy. Volunteers went to New York where people were flooded out of their homes and to western Maryland where the same storm brought almost 3 feet of snow.

What might it look like for you, personally, to extend God’s mercy to those who are living amidst the rising flood waters of illness, violence, anxiety this Advent season?

We must also ask, how do we allow others to be present with us and for us in the floods of our own lives? Can we allow ourselves to receive mercy? Or perhaps to bail out the flood waters, with the help of others?

As we live into Advent and look toward Christmas, we dare not “unclick” the apocalypse. Our relatively safe surroundings tempt us to deal with scripture and our faith only metaphorically. It is certainly more convenient that way, more understandable in our context.

But we are part of a global faith community. In solidarity with our sisters and brothers who live the literal stories in the text every day, we must deal with the text on all its complex levels. If we take it into our own hands — to unclick the apocalypse — we are in danger of also deleting the power and freedom that is promised. *Lord have mercy.*

May we be given the courage this season to allow the text and God’s presence to flood over us, disturbing and consoling — with power and mercy.