

Advent 1C, November 28, 2021
Epiphany, Winnipeg
Luke 21:25-36

1 This past week a friend was telling me about what it's like to read this text from Luke, with all its signs in the skies and distress among the nations and all its confusion, and the powers of the heavens being shaken. "It all makes me feel like hiding under something," she said. It sounded kind of lighthearted at the time, but this friend had been a young child in England during World War II, and she has spent more hours than she would care to remember in bomb shelters, hiding under something, while the powers of the heavens were shaken and there were signs in the skies – sirens, and sights, and here come the planes.

She grew up in England, and hid under things in England, but people all over the world, then and now, enemies and friends, people on both sides, know so well what it's like to feel like hiding under something, because the heavens are shaking and the signs are too scary to see.

Maybe you've been there yourself. Or you've felt like hiding under something for all of your own good reasons that aren't conflicts among nations but are conflicts with people you know, maybe people you love, or conflicts deep inside when your own voices that affirm and support clash with your own other voices that condemn. We've all got our own signs in the sun and the moon and the stars that make us afraid, that make you and me and anyone just want to hide under something until the heavens stop shaking and the confusion gives way to some kind of calm; some kind of peace.

Jesus speaks to his disciples about all these things, and it seems that what he's got in mind is all the confusion and the fear that's about to unfold as he and his disciples prepare to go to Jerusalem and to his arrest and his death. He says all

this before there's ever been a good Friday or Easter, before any of his friends could know what's about to happen, before any of them could wonder if they would survive or stay loyal or persevere or just give up; before any of them would know how the story ends or starts up again. Jesus had no way of knowing back then that in November of 2021 there would be floods that would tear away at both coasts in Canada, or that Ethiopia would be dipping its toe to test the waters of a civil war, or that a young woman named Ana would lose a long battle with depression.

It's so long ago, but Jesus gets it right anyway, doesn't he? He doesn't go into detail, he just uses a few quick pictures to show us what we've always known: Something about fear, something about the heavens shaking, something about wars and foreboding (that's a foreboding word, isn't it?).

And just imagine this: as Jesus finishes speaking there's a moment of silence, and then Simon Peter turns to Mary Magdalene and says, "You know, when he talks like that I feel like I just want to go and hide under something."

Maybe my friend – you know, the one who had grown up hiding under something – maybe she was also saying something that we've all known, right from the start. Sometimes you just want to hide. But then Jesus says, "when you see these things starting to happen, the Kingdom of God is on its way. When you see these things starting to happen, you don't have to hide. Stand up, head up, shoulders back, no need to cower; stand up, because your redemption is drawing near."

What Jesus is doing is training us to stand instead of to hide. Or to stand up instead of just giving up. Or to stand up and expect something more when we're tempted to say that the shaking of the heavens is all there is.

And this is something we need to learn. Or maybe it's just me.... Over the past - I don't know, months or more? - I have learned to respond to all these things that Jesus talks about by wanting to hide, and by letting myself be more and more depressed. Earlier this week I heard word of a church I know of who are struggling with how to keep moving, and they're wondering whether they should just shut things down and pack it in. I heard this and just started to cry. That's not my normal response to that kind of news...but it's just more bad news. It occurred to me then that over the past two years I've kind of responded to all the news by just getting depressed. I don't want to make a list of what it's all been, but I know that my habit has been to let myself be brought low.

I need, more than ever, I think, to have someone say to me, "Stand up, head up, shoulders back, breathe...your redemption is drawing near. The world is being brought back from all that just seems to break it. Stand up. Your redemption is drawing near." Maybe we all need someone to say that. It's not a motivational speech, it's not "every cloud has a silver lining," it's not ignoring the bad news, it's not "it's always darkest before the dawn." It's "stand up. You don't need to be afraid." So Jesus talks to a handful of his disciples in the temple in Jerusalem, and he talks to a handful of his disciples in a church in Winnipeg, and he says, "When you see all this you don't need to be afraid. When you see all this, remember: the kingdom of God is coming, the world is being restored and made new, and all the reports that say otherwise will give way to the justice, and the grace, and the compassion, and the being together and the eating together, and the welcome to outsiders and even to insiders, the levelling of rich and poor, and the peace of the reign of God. Stand up. Everything is being made new."

Jesus steps in and speaks that word for us.

Jesus is teaching us to live in the world as though all that is true. And for now, when the news is always so heavy, we are being trained to see small signs of grace in the world around us. Small things: Candles on a wreath or on a windowsill. The darkness of the night that calls us to rest and be still. A nod and a smile between strangers, someone saying Happy Holidays – that’s called being kind – or Merry Christmas or Happy Hanukkah or a belated but well-meaning Happy Diwali. Deer grazing or a few geese sticking around stubbornly through the winter, a piece of chocolatey sweetness. Small things. Or big things, like a mostly white jury saying that Black Lives do Matter in Georgia, or the hospitality of strangers who welcome evacuees as they get away again from yet more floods in BC. None of these things say the world is changing overnight. But they are signs that God’s reign won’t be silenced, they are signs that God’s good gifts are still being given, and they are signs that Jesus’ words of hope and forgiveness and life will not pass away, but will always, always, hold sway.

We lose sight of this. Then Advent calls us to be still for a season and to see it again; to listen and learn and be bathed by quiet good news spoken on a dark and quiet night: that One is coming to be with us, One who will heal the whole creation.

Advent says, “OK, breathe. You don’t need to panic, you don’t need to run around trying to fix everything right now. There is a time for that, but for now...slow down and wait for the one who is coming. Open the doors to let good news come, unbar the gates because the One who brings that news is coming to live with us. Stand up, raise your head. The world’s redemption is coming near.”

AMEN.