

When It Is Dark Enough, You Can See the Stars

A sermon based on Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

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The New Testament Gospels are billed as heralds of good news, but if we look to today's Gospel reading to set the tone for Advent it could be dreary month ahead! If "tis the season to be jolly," then Luke 21 'tis not the passage to put us in the mood! The Gospel of Luke starts this year's Advent season with a frightening melange of dire signs, distress, confusion, and noise! (Luke 21:25) "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world," (21:26) says Luke. "The heavens – 'sun, ...moon, and... stars' – will be shaken," he says. (21:25-26)

Had Luke had the benefit of the New Testament Book of Revelation, his description might have been even more colourful, for in Revelation there are stars falling out of the sky left, right and centre! "The stars... fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale," says Revelation. (6:13)

There's a "whole lotta shakin' goin' on" in some parts of the New Testament, the shaking of the heavens representing a universe shaken, creation coming undone, a crisis of existence, a time of great uncertainty. Though Advent will culminate in the birth of a child, a glorious experience, the gospel text assigned to be read today is not about birth but a dark passage of doom, gloom, despair and destruction. Jesus had predicted the destruction of the temple, and indeed, a generation after his death (A.D. 70) the temple was burned, and several years later not one stone of it was left standing on another.

Biblical passages like this defy our liberal notion that every day things just get better and better! In our Gospel reading things get worse and worse! It's a grim time. An apocalyptic time. And Jesus predicted things would get even darker, evoking a picture of a cosmic calamity in the making. Indeed, after the temple was destroyed, a Roman general (Titus) had a statue of Caesar erected in the courtyard of the burned out shell (A.D. 72). Shortly after that, the Jews were driven from Jerusalem. They fled to a mountain called Masada where they barricaded themselves against the Romans, but the crafty Romans built an earthen ramp and stormed the fortress, only to find nearly everyone inside dead! Having divided themselves into groups of ten, each leader had killed the other nine and then committed suicide. A thousand people died; only two women and five children remained. The Jews outside Jerusalem were scattered to the four winds, to be without a homeland for the next nineteen centuries.

In the darkness stars shine brightly

It's a powerful indication of the overwhelming darkness in our Gospel reading that even stars are shaken in this time of chaos and uncertainty. The image of a star, in biblical literature, is a very positive image, first coming to prominence when God took Abraham out into the desert night to show him the stars and to make incredible promises. (Genesis 15:5) God said to Abraham, "I will ... bless you, and I will make your offspring

as numerous as the stars of heaven” (Genesis 22:17; 26:4) – a promise that echoes throughout the Scriptures! Then, in the book of Numbers comes a prophecy regarding the Star of Jacob (Numbers 24:17), inspiring hope of a great king, a king with the wherewithal to finally bring peace to war-ravaged Israel. The Star of Jacob became a powerful symbol of hope to Israel, a hope that could not be extinguished even when there was precious little evidence of God doing any work at all toward the realization of that hope!

Stars figured prominently in the lives of ancient peoples, and many believed the stars had significant influence on human affairs. While the biblical tradition is cautious about letting the power of the stars rival the power of God, stars were powerful symbols, even in Israel, and their shakiness in our Gospel reading indicates that the times were dark indeed!

A foreboding climate such as this may seem strange to us, but by the time the author of Luke’s gospel set to writing his narrative, the followers of Jesus found themselves immersed in dark and foreboding times. They were beginning to wonder, not without justification, how the persecution they were experiencing fit into the notion that the Messiah had come, that the reign of God was at hand, and that the world was redeemed! There was much so evidence to the contrary!

We may find it difficult to take comfort, let alone Christmas cheer from this apocalyptic passage, but those who first read Luke’s Gospel took encouragement – not immediate encouragement, but long-range encouragement and perspective – because their own existence had been shaken. And they took courage from Luke’s words because Luke is telling us to look for redemption (Luke 21:28), even in the midst of chaos! It may not be obvious. It may not be announced on the 11 o’clock news, but don’t lose heart! And then he tells us one of the parables Jesus told, saying, “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” (21:29-31)

It seems to me that Luke was asking his readers to be alert to signs of quite another order than the unsettling ones taking place around them. Alongside the dramatic and tumultuous changes affecting us adversely are less dramatic, even subtle signs that the growth of God’s kingdom is coming about. One can no more rush it, however, than one can rush the growth of a tree. It’s hard to gauge the growth of tree from one day to the next, but over the course of a season its growth is quite noticeable.

Our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah uses the image of a tree even more vividly, indicating that God will “cause a righteous Branch to spring up...,” “and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” (Jeremiah 33:15) It’s the same picture evoked by Isaiah when he uses the paradoxical image of new growth coming out of a dead stump! (Isaiah 11:1)

Similarly, though the earth and heavens be shaking and stars falling, it is, paradoxically, a star that will lead to renewed hope of redemption. Though I am not a regular star-gazer, I have two vivid recollections of star-studded heavens. I remember being overwhelmed when living in the far north by both the stars and the northern lights. I also remember some twenty years later standing in an unlit village in the dark of night of southern Africa, overwhelmed by the sheer number and intensity of the stars, presided over, as always, by the prominent Southern Cross. Having stared at the heavens in both

hemispheres I can only say with the psalmist, “When I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have established... O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:3, 9)

The ancient Persians had a saying: “When it is dark enough you can see the stars,” and so it is only fitting we begin Advent in darkness, for then we have a fighting chance to catch a glimpse of the Star of Bethlehem – the Star that will lead us, if we are alert to its movement, to the one the Book of Revelation calls the Bright and Morning Star! (Revelation 22:16)

God comes to us in our darkest times

It’s hard believe that God would send a vulnerable child into this darkness and chaos. Our Gospel reading warns us to be alert (Luke 21:36), as do numerous other passages, warning us to prepare, but we almost want to say, “Don’t come among us! We’re not ready! Don’t become flesh! Don’t be born of Mary! Don’t send the angels to the shepherds! Don’t lay that little child in the manger! Hide him! Hide him where Herod can’t find him! Call it off before it’s too late, before this brutal, cruel world kills him!”

We weren’t ready, and we’re not ready, for this world is full of injustice and inexplicable tragedy, but God comes to us in the midst of darkness. Even when the fledgling Christian movement suffered unspeakable persecution, God was there among them. When, during the Middle Ages much of the population of Europe came to an end with the Black Plague, God was there in the midst of them. When Native North and South Americans were all but wiped out by the swords and diseases of conquerors, God was there, though perhaps not on the side assumed. When millions of Jews saw the end of the world in the Holocaust or the jungles of Cambodia became “killing fields,” God may have wished He were elsewhere, but God was there. When personal tragedy comes to our lives and we feel completely bereft, God is there with us.

God was not satisfied with remaining high and mighty and powerful. God refused to keep a safe distance between heaven and earth, and came among us, all the perils of the incarnation notwithstanding. And because God came among us, those who have experienced darkness “have seen a great light”. (Isaiah 9:2; Matthew 4:16) Those who have “sat in the ... shadow of death,” on them has “light ... dawned,” says the Gospel. (Matthew 4:16)

One of the most enduring Advent and Christmas images for me is the story of a group of Japanese Christians meeting in their half-destroyed church for their first Christmas after the atomic bombing of their city, singing “Joy to the World!” The image of a post-nuclear holocaust Christmas Carol boggles the mind, but bolsters the spirit. No place, however vast the devastation or deep the despair, is an unlikely place to experience and express the joy of God’s coming among us. No darkness can withstand the light of God’s presence. Indeed, in the darkest darkness you can see the Star of Bethlehem from here!

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.