

## **Pulling Back the Curtain**

Luke 21:25-36

First Sunday of Advent/ Year C

November 29, 2009

**O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Amen.**

Adjustments are a fact of life. We make them all day long usually without giving them a passing thought. We adjust the volume on the television and the radio so we can better hear the daily broadcasts. The more business-minded among us are attentive to such things as adjustable mortgage rates and who hasn't adjusted their schedule, at one time or another, to accommodate someone in need. Other adjustments take more consideration and energy and may have far reaching consequences. For example, moving from one apartment or house to another often requires the rearrangement of one's furniture or the purchasing of new couches and chairs. Marriage requires one to adjust to living in a life-long committed relationship with another human being. Baptism requires one to adjust his or her life, in such a way, that one is able to live out and reflect the values of the gospel. Even such a thing as changing from one liturgical season to another, like we are doing this morning in our shift from the season after Pentecost into the season of Advent, means adjusting to new challenges inherent in the gospel.

This Sunday's gospel reading calls for an adjustment with far reaching consequences; an adjustment whose scope stretches, in fact, to the final judgment. We are being asked this morning to modify our daily living in order to develop a kind of vigilance or expectation that allows us to discern the signs of the Lord's presence. We are called to be attentive to how God is at work among us and in us. We are to be watchful for the ways in which our own stories intersect with God's story. That said, as stories go, our reading, this morning, from the gospel of Luke does not appear interested in telling us much of one. Within these eleven verses, there is no account of Jesus giving sight to the blind or making the lame walk. He does not raise the dead. Nor is he anywhere near someone possessed with demons, so we don't even get to watch evil spirits shake in their boots. Jesus fails even to provoke the Romans or to aggravate the Jewish leaders. He is simply sitting with his roving band of disciples at the base of the Temple, chatting away. There is nothing unusual about finding Jesus engaged in conversation with his followers, religious figures and political leaders still do much the same to this day. A tourist, wandering through the Temple that bright morning, certainly wouldn't have thought of Jesus and the twelve as anything worth writing home about. Except, that with Jesus most things are something to write home about. Throughout his travels in Palestine, Jesus' miracles tended to shake people up, whether it was the squirming shakes of fearful demons about to be evicted, the tingling thrill of those who were healed or the quaking of those who saw their positions threatened. Jesus words could cause squirming and quaking too, perhaps none more so than the words he utters this morning. Strange and wondrous, they cause our very hearts to thrill.

Our Lord unfolds before our eyes a vision of disaster, of cosmic catastrophe, of

apocalypse. He says that the sun, the very light which God placed in the heavens to rule the day, and the moon and stars which rule the night will have signs appear in them. You can almost see the disciples, shielding their eyes attempting to look into the sunny sky. As Jesus' apocalyptic train of thought continues, what becomes clear, at least to our ears, is that these celestial signs of which the Lord speaks, do not seem to bode well for us. The sea roars like an angry lioness in response to their appearance. All of creation convulses unsure whether it is unmaking itself, giving birth or perhaps both. Whatever the case, the uproar in the heavens and the earth, places humankind on a cosmic tilt-a-whirl. Christ's description is almost amusing. We act like frightened children who want off an amusement park ride that won't stop. When it become clear that creation is no longer under our control and that there's no way of jumping overboard, we simply faint. Our fainting does us little good. Creation ignores us. The heavens continue to convulse until finally the "Son of Man", the "exalted Christ" appears riding on a cloud like it's an imperial chariot.

If the average listener isn't shaking by the time Christ finishes with this description, than one imagines that he or she is at least puzzled by it if not cautiously curious. Here in the gospel of Luke, Jesus unapologetically uses the language of apocalypse. He dabbles in apocalyptic images and pictures. And to be perfectly honest, there is something unnerving about it, frightening even. Most of us tend to see apocalypse as gloom and doom, as divine vengeance inflicted on an unfaithful world. To our twenty-first century eyes, the God of the apocalypse is little more than an unforgiving bully in the sky who cannot wait to squash us sinners like insects. He is a God struck by a singular determination to end all things. Jesus' doesn't see apocalypse in quite the same way as we do. Rather than an ending, the apocalypse is viewed as a transforming. Through countless years of handling and mishandling, of poor interpretation and fiction which grossly underestimates God (Tim Lahaye and the "Left Behind" series comes to mind), we have lost the real meaning of the word "apocalypse." Apocalypse means revelation, literally an "unveiling," a pulling back of the curtain. This is what Jesus is doing when he regales us, along with his disciples, about signs in the sun and the moon. He is showing us that things are not always as they appear and, well, isn't that good news! Particularly for those of us who live in a world which often appears out of control, who live in a world where people have to fight and scrounge for daily bread, where wars and rumors of wars are rampant, where terrorism seems to lurk around every corner, where people lose their jobs, where families become estranged, where power and might hold sway and where people are kept in their place, as if God had ordained them to second class citizenship.

The message of apocalypse is not rooted in fright, but rooted in hope- a message which says that things will not always be this way, that the powers of darkness will not hold us in their grasp forever. Jesus uses language, this morning, which is larger than life, but it is language meant to anticipate an event which itself is larger than life- the moment when God intervenes once and for all; when God answers the groanings, the convulsing, the shaking of creation. And for those of us who want to know when all this

will come to pass, for those of us who, even now, join our cries to the martyrs in the

Book of Revelation screaming “How long,” Christ seems to offer an answer.

“The signs of God’s intervention” he says. “His coming, his advent are all around us if only we are willing to look closely.” Just like the fig trees in spring, when we see the foliage start to sprout, we know that summer is very near. So also the kingdom is near, nearer than we realize, maybe as near as the next breath. The coming kingdom makes itself known to us along the seams of creation. The kingdom rears its shining crown in unsettling ways, in those “a-ha” moments in our daily living. But even these wondrous moments, such as they happen to be, are but glimpses of the coming kingdom. They are not the kingdom itself. For that we must remain ever watchful.

Watchfulness, wariness and vigilance are key attitudes within today’s gospel. That being said, watching and waiting are not easy, precisely because other things do interfere. While most of us are probably not “weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness,” (despite Saint Luke’s obvious concern for such a possibility), we do remain a people harassed by “the worries of this life.” Our anxieties take a terrible toll on our ability to be attentive to God and to what God is up to in our midst. In our concern over providing for our families, in our difficulties relating to work and, yes, retirement, in our fretting over the affairs of government, in our clamoring after power and status, in things both worthy and trivial, we allow our vision to become clouded. We lose sight of the impending kingdom of God. Our attention strays to matters which are often hardly Christian. Therefore, in order to be truly vigilant, we must first and foremost, die to ourselves. We must sacrifice those wants and needs which hold us back from truly belonging to Christ. We must present our lives as offerings to the “Son of Man” who chooses to be intimately present with us. We have nothing to fear if we live as if the end times are now, as if the kingdom has arrived, as if Christ, in this very moment, is present in all his glory.

The signs of Christ’s presence are available to all who are willing to see. In fact, our very lives can manifest the Lord’s presence as we grow in our love of God and neighbor. We must ask ourselves, this morning, whether or not we are living into the life we claim as Christians? Are we bearing fruit? When others look at us are they seeing new life in the midst of death? Are they able to catch in our behavior a glimpse of the glory of the Son of Man coming into the darkness? Are they able to see Christ “adventing” himself in our hearts and lives? Or, have we, through our actions and inactions, obscured their vision. Has our concern for what is often petty and incidental made us blind in our own ability to grasp the big picture. The season of Advent reminds us that things are not what they seem, that normalcy and predictability are disappearing forever. The pregnancy of one more teenage girl will no longer be an ordinary matter, but an overture to a cosmic event. In the birth of a helpless baby all the powers of the universe will discover that the days of their own power are numbered. Nothing will ever be the same. You just watch!