

“The Great Unveiling”

Sermon on Sunday, November 27, 2022

Dear church,

I don't want to make any bones about it this morning... The gospel for the First Sunday of Advent is a heavy piece to chew on, somber in spirit, providing a stark contrast to the delightful holiday atmosphere that greets us at every corner this time of year. I also won't apologize for it. This passage is part of the gospel too, part of the lesser-known apocalyptic genre in our Holy Scripture. It revolves around a sudden catastrophic event and sounds the alarm. “As in the days of Noah,” Jesus says, “so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man... they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away...” The entire passage continues in that serious tone, urging people to be prepared, much like our community volunteer fire fighters train to be prepared for a devastating fire. The other day the North Wales troop was practicing here on our property, using a hydraulic lift, aiming to be ready when called upon. (I told them next time they could do our steeple repairs as part of their exercise. They could get some good training in, and we would save a lot of money...)

For as long as I can remember I have always struggled with these anxiety evoking passages that don't seem to bring any good news to the table. The timing of these readings during the American holiday season is also anti-climactic; we hear about impending suffering and death at a time when we try to focus on the brighter, more hopeful aspects of life. But then, we are asked to grow up as children of God and face the real dangers of our time, face them with the spiritual resources given to us and prepare. Sometimes Christians treat the gospel as a convenient cover, a hiding place from the dangers of the world, and it is not. A significant party of the gospels tries to help us in fact see the dangers among and around us so we can deal with them.

Someone might ask, “What was the catastrophic event that Jesus had on his mind?” “Did it happen? Jesus was likely referring to the destruction of Jerusalem that was in the air because of constantly rising tensions with the Romans; indeed, the city was destroyed a few decades after Jesus' death. The massacre claimed many lives and altered the course of Jewish history.

We could say that's ancient history now and has nothing to do with us. Fair enough... But that's not how we read scripture. We read the historic parts of the Bible not as past events but as metaphors for our time. And I must say, in recent years these texts have started to speak to me in whole new ways. I have begun to appreciate them not despite but because of the urgency they imply. And you probably know why... because extreme weather events and man-made disasters occur with regularity and intensity all over the earth. We can't dismiss it as mere doomsday talk. In fact, the global community is trying to come to grips with the fact that we are de-stabilizing the balance of ecology and are seriously messing with our future. Jesus would say to us, "Don't be scared, but be prepared!" He might say, "Don't dismiss it because you are scared but embrace it as the beginning of something new. The Son of Man is with you!" We could turn the urgency of the message into something good and positive.

What might be helpful here is a reflection on the word apocalypse itself. It sounds scary that word, but its literal translation is interesting, even inspiring. It means "unveiling." The word suggests that we often live under a veil of deception. Unveiling the deception in our lives is always painful but it is ultimately liberating, empowering, even in private matters. We finally see what we are up against. If you ask me, what is happening in our world right now is a great unveiling of a deception. We are discovering that the industrial model and the expectation of unlimited growth, a model with which we all grew up, a model especially celebrated in the US, is not sustainable, at least not the model we know. It's a painful realization. It's a little bit like losing the ground under your feet. But the unveiling is for our own good. God is speaking to us through Mother Nature. And across the world there are little candles of hope that are beginning to shine and illumine a way forward. Let us remember that hope is never generated in a sunny environment. Hope has always been born in a time of shadows and partial darkness. In fact, this is one of the signature messages of advent, Jesus' citation of the prophet Isaiah at the beginning of his ministry: *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined."*

So, what are the candles of hope that are drawing from the Great Light that created this world? There are many, and they don't necessarily have religious connotations; yet as I see it, the light of God shines through them. One small big story I recently heard was about an inventor who is investing in a hydrogen model for the entire airline industry. This person has established a company to start equipping smaller commercial aircraft with clean hydrogen technology, taking a risk, betting on the future. There are many other examples and most of them come from individuals or small groups of people who are thinking outside of the box. Or from businesses and companies committed to a better future. May God bless all of them! And may God give them even more creativity! And make no mistake, this is only possible because the great unveiling of long-held deceptions, the apo-calyipse, is taking place before our eyes. And so, we are at a humble beginning. Light the candle of hope! Amen.