

"Amber Alert of Cosmic Proportions"

Sermon on Sunday, December 2, 2018

Based on Luke 21: 25-36

An elderly man, suspecting his wife is losing her hearing, goes about 20' behind her and asks, "Can you hear me sweetheart?" No reply. He moves a little closer and inquires again. No reply. He gets really worried now and moves to within 5', but not a word. Finally, just behind her ear, from the top of his lungs he shouts, "Can you hear me now honey"? His wife replies, "For the fourth time, yes!"

American novelist Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures." Well, that's precisely what Jesus does in his prophetic wake-up call in Luke 21. He shouts, he draws startling figures, and he uses every rhetorical device at his disposal to snap his listeners to attention. "Be on guard," he warns his disciples. "Be alert." "Stand up and raise your heads."

Advent always starts with a wake-up call and, as much as I'm aware of the lectionary readings, it still catches me off guard every single time. Apparently I am just too much a child of our culture, because every year I expect something soothing and calming, comfortable and warm at the beginning of December. Then I come across the gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent, and I begin to swallow and ask myself, "Why can't someone else preach this week?" Because Advent begins with an Amber alert of cosmic proportions. It reminds us that our faith is embedded in all the realities of life, including uncomfortable and downright nasty ones, including the realities we should be dealing with but aren't because we're afraid, and how is this for a sample?

Jesus says: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." I used to think, "Boy, do we really have to talk about this end-of world, gloomy stuff?" It seems so counter-intuitive to the season. Aren't we lighting the candle of hope today? But this year I am thinking, yes, we absolutely need to talk about this stuff. Right after Thanksgiving, as most of you know, our government issued a report on climate change and if you haven't noticed: it's an amber alert of cosmic proportions; it's a stark warning about what could happen if we don't change infrastructure on earth in a big way. The people of California have already received a very bitter taste of weather extremes this year. The scenes from the fire in the town of Paradise were absolutely horrible. Californians seem to be dealing with a new "fire of the century" every year now. Droughts have become more severe in that part of our country while we on the East have seen record rain falls, a foot and a half of surplus rain in our region over the course of this year. That's a lot! The weather is getting more extreme almost everywhere. So, how are we dealing with this new reality?

The truth is we have been trying to avoid it as best we can. We have been trying to say, "Maybe it's not as bad as they say it will be. Maybe they just paint the worst possible scenario. Let's wait and see." We have been trying to point fingers, "Yes, we probably need to change, but the Chinese have to change even more. They are the emerging economic power and the biggest polluters." We have been led by fear. We are afraid if we do what we have to do and become more "green," people in the carbon industries will lose jobs and livelihoods. We think businesses

will suffer and be less profitable and take many of us down with them. We fear that this topic will be overly politicized, as if the weather distinguishes between party affiliations. It's not like we can smear the blood of the lamb on our door posts and the angel of extreme weather magically bypasses our house because we have been supporting needed changes. No, we are all together in it. It's the reality of our world today and we can't escape it, so we might as well face it. And once we do that, we have a praying chance and hope can emerge out of the ashes of our worst fears. O come, Emmanuel!

That's what advent teaches us on its very first Sunday when we are confronted with images of cosmic trepidations and world-wide catastrophes. Yes, it's scary to listen to Jesus' description of signs in heaven and the roaring of the sea and people in distress. Yes, it is scary to think about a climate report that confirms our worst fears of more extreme weather and suffering in the future, but let's face it: it's not as scary as trying to get out of your town because of fire or flood and you realize it's too late. It's not as scary as escaping into the safety of a fire truck in the midst of a fire storm and the firemen yell, "Our truck is melting!" Those are all things that happened this year, and many more. O come, Emmanuel!

Jesus has the audacity to say, "when these catastrophes begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." I read that, not as a one-time description referring to some apocalyptic event in the future that will magically transport us to heaven. I read it as an all-time description for the apocalyptic scenarios people have to deal with in any given age. Augustine thought the world was coming to an end when Rome was sacked in the early 5th century. Luther expected the end to come perhaps in his life time in the 16th century. People thought the atomic age will surely spell the beginning of self-destruction on earth in the 20th century.

The gospel doesn't deny any of those possibilities. But our faith gives us the courage to stand up and believe that redemption is near even as we face those scenarios. Now, it takes us a long time to adjust to reality, especially if it means major changes. We tend to deny the need to change until we suffer, until we just can't continue in the old ways anymore. Again, Flannery O'Connor: "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures." Catastrophes shout at us in the world of 2018. O come, Emmanuel!

We, the people, have been shouted at for years now and pretended to be deaf. Our own government's climate report was just the latest shouting. It lays out the effects of a changing climate on the economy, health and environment, including record wild fires in the west, crop failures in the Midwest and crumbling infrastructure in the South. But even if this report didn't exist, even if it isn't entirely on target, it seems like creation itself is shouting at us, trying to get our attention. "Can you hear me, honey?" But we are hard of hearing.

My hope is that God may get through to us, that people everywhere find the courage to ask for needed changes, to bless creation not just with prayers, but with acts of thoughtful consumer behavior. It's a hope I have, sometimes against what I see and sense is happening. And I pray, "O Come, O come Emmanuel!" And I ask you to join me in this hope-filled advent prayer for our world: "O Come, o come, Emmanuel!" **Amen.**