

First Weekend of Advent (C/RCL)
Luke 21.25-36
November 28/29, 2009
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan

You can buy space in *The Coast Star* to congratulate loved ones on birthdays, anniversaries, graduations.... Those personal ads often include a photo and usually **don't** include the recipient's last name, probably a form of damage control for the people placing the ads, who are embarrassing their family member or friend big time. This past week a personal ad featuring a woman wearing glasses and holding a phone to her ear caught my eye. It read:

Oh No...
THE BIG
60
Enjoy yourself, Barbara,
before it's too late.
Love,
from your friends
at the office

"Enjoy yourself before it's too late" is a common response to aging. We think we glimpse the end of our **life** a little closer on the horizon than it used to be, and may decide to party while there's still time. In today's Gospel Jesus gives the disciples a glimpse of what has been called the end of the **world**. He gives them the opposite advice that Barbara's co-workers are giving her. Instead of saying, "Enjoy yourself before it's too late," Jesus says:

"[B]e on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it's going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don't go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you may have the strength and wits to make it through everything that's coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man." Luke 21.34-36 (*The Message*)

This reading describes two possible responses to perceived threats, to “danger ahead” signs on the road ahead:

1. Panic
2. Preparation

Those who panic focus on the terrifying details Jesus describes: upheaval in the heavens, distress around the globe, surging, roaring seas, people fainting with fear. They figure the end is imminent and awful, bearing down on them like a locomotive. It’s as if they’re lashed to the tracks like Nell in *Rocky and Bullwinkle* or the heroine in *The Perils of Pauline*, powerless to alter their fate. In their panic, they self-medicate themselves into a stupor or otherwise descend into self-destructive and other-destructive behavior.

Those who **prepare** take a different tack. They also may be frightened by what they hear, but they are able to connect the **prophecy** with the **promise**. They recognize the **end** of this world as the **beginning** of God’s reign. Jesus talks frankly with His disciples, a group which includes us. He lets them know that the old order must be destroyed before the new order can dawn. Count on it: the powers of this world and of Satan don’t **want** to give way. They have to be thrust aside. They’re going to go out kicking and screaming.

Someone has explained it this way:

The ‘signs of the end’ are but the signs of God’s new beginning... The messianic woes usher in the messianic kingdom... ‘Distress’ (v. 25) – ‘redemption’ (v. 28): it may be that God has no other way of breaking through the crust of our pride and self-reliance.

The Interpreter’s Bible, Luke, p. 369

To say that we are poised to respond with preparation rather than panic to Jesus’ prophecy about the end is **not** to say that we have **nothing** to be concerned about. Sin sowed the seeds of death in the Garden of Eden and in our lives and world. In mythic

language the Book of Genesis tells us that the brokenness of our lives is rooted in our sin: our insistence on charting our own course, on catering to self instead of serving God, on falling prey to addictions instead of falling to our knees in prayer. There are some things about this present world we may miss, either when we leave or when Jesus arrives, but physical sickness, emotional turmoil, psychic pain will not be among them. Scripture tells us that the end of the world as we know it will bring judgment, and that is sobering. We believe we will be called to give an accounting of our life to the Giver of life, and we all have chapters we'd rather skip over. If we're blessed with **any** self-awareness, we realize we have failed the test and have fallen to temptation on many an occasion.

I came across an interesting reflection on this, from an old but wise resource, *The Interpreter's Bible*:

God has his own ways of coming; there is terror in them and there is promise in them... The issue will depend on whether or not we can muster enough despair to provide us with the kind of hope that will not betray us. That despair and hope belong together is the very content of the gospel...

...There is another kind of assurance that staggers to its feet at the very moment when the world is at its worst. There is something God has done that can change the climate of human history. But it is for those who have learned despair. They and they alone know where hope is. p. 369

Many of us have "learned despair" – not the despair that causes someone to leap from a building or off a bridge or in front of a train – but the kind that bleeds life of its color at the deathbed of a loved one or in the oncologist's office or in the unemployment line or in the thick of battle or alone at the table on a holiday. In the face of all that, and in a thousand other scenarios that might break the human spirit, Jesus says,

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down... Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things... and to stand before the Son of Man."

Luke 21.34, 36

As we prepare prayerfully for Jesus' return, we are naturally led to perform works of love. The hungry being fed, the homeless finding shelter, the lonely being accompanied, the vulnerable of all ages being protected, swords being beaten into ploughshares: these are **also** signs that the kingdom is coming and that our Lord is making all things new.

After I read the newspaper on Friday, I looked out the parsonage kitchen window and saw bright yellow along the cemetery fence line. It looked like there was forsythia in bloom. We've seen trees flower during a warm January, so I wondered... but then realized it was autumn, not spring yellow I was seeing, a dying vine going out in a blaze of color rather than forsythia jumping the gun. The first lesson from Jeremiah (33.14-15) came to mind:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Advent is the time when we remember God's promises and God's perfect faithfulness in keeping them: a flowering of the stump of Jesse, the arrival of the promised Messiah, the coming of the kingdom, the end of this world which will be the consummation of the next. We have every reason to prepare, but none to panic. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham