

Distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves.

People fainting from fear and foreboding.

The heavens shaking.

These are the things nightmares are made of.

This passage sounds scary, and it is.

That's the thing about Advent, it gives us clergy this weird cognitive dissonance.

The season of Advent is about Jesus' second coming, his returning in power and glory, as much as it is about his first coming.

You see, I know that most of us are associating this time of year with the dramatic story of Jesus' birth, and the first few days of his life.

We're thinking about a baby, vulnerability, a scared young mother and supportive father.

We're thinking about animals at the barn, and the inn that had no room.

We're imagining a very pregnant Mary riding on a donkey, even though the text never says she rides on a donkey.

But that's okay because we've created a beautiful story in our imaginations and it has nothing to do with the apocalypse.

It's not about the mountains shaking or the skies breaking open or stormy seas.

Our story certainly doesn't include terrified people passing out.

Our story at this time of year is about the beginning of Jesus' life, not the end.

It's not about his trial and execution.

And yet, here we are, with today's text, from the Gospel of Luke which is at the end of Jesus' ministry.

The very next chapter begins with Jesus going into Jerusalem for Passover and the priests are looking for a reason to betray him.

So why is this text assigned to today, the first Sunday of Advent?

Because, like I said, Advent is about Jesus' first coming and his return.

It's about the already and the not yet.

It's about knowing what was and waiting for what is yet to come.

The text we heard this morning foreshadows Jesus' return.

It's a prophecy of his return.

He is promising his disciples that while he has to leave them in this mortal life, he'll be back.

But here's the thing.

We're really playing with chronological time here, because this text was written *after* something cataclysmic had already happened.

Luke was writing about 60-70 years after the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed.

He is telling the story of what has already happened, as if it is yet to come.

Luke and his contemporaries were living in a world that felt like it had ended and would never again exist as they knew it.

Their culture was overrun, the empire ruled, and the priesthood was the keeper of the temple in collusion with the Roman empire.

The Jewish people who had not sold themselves to the Roman Empire were impoverished and oppressed.

Luke is writing by looking straight ahead, into the future, but he's writing about something that's in his rearview mirror, if that makes sense.

He is trying to make sense of the tragedy by understanding it in such a way, that it must have been meant to be.

He writes so that it sounds like Jesus foretold it.

Jesus foretold the destruction that would happen to their temple and their people.

It was part of a greater plan.

That's what we do when we are trying to make sense of tragedy, when things are falling apart, we survive by telling ourselves that there's a reason for this, *and* that something greater is coming.

We tell ourselves that all this scary stuff isn't the end of the story, it's a stepping stone on the way to something better than what existed before.

It's like the pangs of birth.

I've heard that labor hurts.

It's painful.

And it can take forever.

And sometimes it's a waiting game, breathing through the pain, knowing something greater is coming, knowing that birth, that new life is on the horizon.

This terrible, awful, uncomfortable time has to happen in order for something new to be born out of the pain.

♦ The theme for today's service is *hope*.

Each Sunday in Advent has a theme: hope, peace, joy and love.

These texts provoke us into the irrational hope that is Christian hope.

We are not called to be wise or shrewd in human ways, but the Apostle Paul tells us that we are fools for Christ's sake, because God's foolishness is wiser than all of our wisdom.

People who think they are wise, think they have it all figured out, they think they can explain why bad and good things happen and why some people suffer and others don't and when calamity befalls us,

they're the ones who tell us that it's all doom and gloom and that this, most recent crisis, is the beginning of the end.

But you see, us Christians, we have this foolish hope, and we place this deep and abiding trust in God which tells us that there is always something better yet to come.

The story being unwritten before our eyes is not the beginning of the end, it's part of the journey.

Pain and suffering means that something new, something good is being born and we must pay attention to what that is.

For example, there was a 42% increase in anti-Semitic incidents from 2016-2017, right here in Massachusetts.

Incidents means assault, vandalism and harassment.

You might think to yourself, that's horrible, people are becoming more anti-Semitic, this evil virus is spreading right here in our own state.

But I don't think that's true.

The anti-Semitic virus was there all along, now it's just showing its symptoms.

Now people are acting out their hatred because they feel emboldened, as if they've been given the permission to do so.

Where's the good in that?

Well, you can only root out evil if you know that it exists.

You can only respond to prejudice and bigotry if you know where it manifests itself.

Sadly, many of the anti-Semitic incidents have occurred in schools.

But now we know that education around tolerance, acceptance and understanding needs to be drastically increased, as well as educating our young people about the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust.

So yes, this rise in incidents is scary and painful, especially for our Jewish neighbors.

But my defiant Christian hope tells me that the pains are the beginning of a process of healing and wholeness.

When a societal illness is brought to the light, it can no longer fester and spread underground.

We can address it, and work to stop its spread.

A pessimist might say that hatred and division are spreading, but the foolish Christian with eternal hope, says, no, the hatred and division are coming into the light so they can be overcome by love, justice and reconciliation.

When God created us, God called us good.

We are called to live into that goodness, not succumb to despair and defeat.

In today's text, the author tells us that other people will faint with fear and foreboding.

Other people will be overcome by the pain.

Other people will feel defeated, despondent, like the divisions in our nation, income inequality, the health of our planet and our relationships with other nations are insurmountable obstacles.

But the author of this text tells us that amidst all these awful things that are happening, we must stand up and raise our heads.

While others are afraid, we must show our defiant hope.

We place our trust in Jesus' promise, which he says will not pass away.

While preparing for Jesus' birth might feel like a commemoration of something that happened thousands of years ago, it's still surprisingly relevant.

This time of year reminds us that we do still place our trust, and our hope, in this man who taught us how to live, how to exist, how to treat each other, how to hold onto hope when terrible things happen.

But before that, this man started out as a vulnerable baby, his legacy began with two parents who had defiant hope.

In a way I think we place our trust in Mary and Joseph as well.

They were living under terrible circumstances; this Lukan text probably would have felt all too real for them as they made their way to Bethlehem.

But despite what they had to endure, they still held onto hope.

Hope that God was at work in all of this, hope that their baby would be born healthy and would grow up to change the world.

They maintained the hope that they were doing all that they were doing for a greater reason.

My friends, it can feel like we are living in scary times.

So maybe it's appropriate to be reminded that the Advent season has a scary side to it.

An already, Jesus birth, and a not yet, Jesus return.

An already, the pain we're experiencing all around us, the not yet, the birthing of a better nation in which we have brought our demons to the light and cast them out in the name of love and reconciliation.

While the pain is hard to endure, and some people will faint from fear and foreboding, remember, we are called to raise our heads, with the defiant hope that this suffering is simply the labor pains, as we work together to birth a more peaceful and just world.

Amen.

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