

## Hold on to Hope?

This Sunday marks the First Sunday of Advent. The second beginning of an advent season amid the global pandemic and we lean in once again, to light the candle of hope. If you're like me, you either scoff at the idea of hope --*in this economy?*-- or you're overwhelmed by the idea that you need to *find* hope amid busyness, despair, loss, and anxiety.

The lectionary reading for this first Sunday of advent is Luke 21:25-36:

“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

He told them this parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”<sup>1</sup>

So much hope right? I mean I totally didn't just enter into a state of panic and anxiety even though Jesus says not to be “weighed down”. We might want to pause and read the passage again with something else in mind. What if the scripture for this Sunday of advent is not just about destruction? What if this text is not about despair or existentialism, but hope?

Hope for a new kingdom. Hope for a new beginning.

“At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory... your redemption is drawing near.... Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”<sup>2</sup>

What might Jesus mean by the Kingdom of God drawing near?

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<sup>1</sup> *Holy Bible*, New International Version. Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 6:27a,28,31 NIV

Throughout Luke's gospel, the Kingdom of God is discussed as something that is already here, already amid the people. It is among the sinners and tax-collectors and prostitutes and others communing at the table with Jesus<sup>3</sup>. This Kingdom of God discussed in Luke is a kingdom that is backward from the hierarchy of the Roman empire. A kingdom that values the poor so much that they will inherit it, and a kingdom that says to those who are hungry, you will forever be satisfied; there is enough.<sup>4</sup> Could Jesus be saying that this is the kingdom that is drawing near? A kingdom of love, of enoughness, of acceptance? Does that change our understanding of how we are to prepare and “be on guard”<sup>5</sup>, if we are to be noticing a kingdom coming that is a kingdom of radical love?

In addition, the scriptures with a prediction of destruction are often followed by or alongside the image of new life. Actually in Mark chapter 13 the destruction is described as “birth pains”<sup>6</sup>, suggesting that this destruction is giving birth to something new.

If destruction also symbolizes rebirth, a new order or a new world, then preparation for that looks different. Preparation for a new world order, one where sacrificial love has the last word, is a lot different than preparation for the terror that has been, is, and will come to mark destruction. Existentialism to the point of a catatonic state is the antithesis of ushering in the Kingdom of God. I might even suggest, being too busy with preparation is the opposite of being alert.

A friend who has been preparing to host a thanksgiving dinner recently shared, “Last year, I waited until Wednesday to prepare all of the food and clean the house...By the time thanksgiving dinner arrived, I was angry, tired, and surprisingly not hungry. I was exhausted. I couldn't muster up enough strength to enjoy the feast, to enjoy the community.” She said, “If you wait until the very last minute to get ready, to prepare, you will miss out on all of the joy.”

Although preparing to usher in the Kingdom of God or even usher in the season of advent, celebrating the birth of God-Incarnate, is a **lot** different than preparing a thanksgiving dinner, the concept here is the same. What if Jesus is inviting us to prepare and be alert not so that we run around anxious and anticipatory, but because preparation brings freedom? What if this is an invitation to do work in **hope** that destruction will not be the end, but the beginning of something beautiful? What if we give ourselves permission to find, hold on to, and create spaces of hope even amid our current circumstances?

What if Luke is offering us, demanding us, to prepare for new beginnings even during the destruction of the world as we know it? Actually, if I think about it, it doesn't sound all that different from the birth of a child who was born vulnerable and homeless, amid the execution of

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<sup>3</sup> Lk 5:27-32 MSG

<sup>4</sup> Lk 6:20-23 NIV

<sup>5</sup> Lk 21:34-36 NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Mk 13:8 NIV

first born sons<sup>7</sup>, in the midst of a refugee crisis, and born into a world where kingdoms and nations were colliding. Hope amid calamity. Creation amid chaos<sup>8</sup>.

This first Sunday of advent, it is my prayer that as we light the candle of hope, we will see that it is the light amid the darkness and that the darkness will not overcome it.

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<sup>7</sup> Mt 2:16-18 NIV

<sup>8</sup> Gn 1: 1-5 NRSV