

Advent 1C  
Peace, Seattle  
November 29, 2015  
Luke 21:25-36

## **REFRAME: TO HOPE**

**Advent is upon us, and do you feel it? The anticipation that something is heading our way? Yes, of course—Christmas is coming...that's old news by the time the Sunday after Thanksgiving rolls around. By now retailers have already rung up billions of dollars in sales.**

**I'm talking about something else—something beyond our grasp that's unfolding in the world. This ill-defined "something" has left me wondering whether we are in for good news or simply more bad news?**

**The words of Jeremiah this morning tip decidedly toward the good news column.**

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill my promises. A new branch from the old tree will grow and blossom. Justice will have its day. Exiles will have their home. All will live their lives in safety.

**AH!—would that that day arrive—and soon!**

**And our second lesson, from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, positively brims with joy and love. Paul has received a good report from Timothy about how the congregation they founded has been getting along, and now Paul, writing to them for the first time, with, (I suspect) equal parts relief and genuine joy, lets his heart overflow with gratitude.**

Sure, there are issues that need attending to, but things are moving in the right direction.

**Two tallies, then, in the GOOD NEWS column.**

**But when it comes to the reading from Luke we're left with a very different impression.**

What Jesus has to say sounds a lot more like bad news than good; and is more likely to bump up anxiety than to dial it down.

**And in light of recent events in our world, the language spoken by Jesus in these opening verses rings true.**

The downing of the Russian passenger plane; deadly attacks carried out by ISIS in Paris and Beirut; heightened tensions between Russia's Putin and Turkey's Erdogan—these developments form a powerful context for hearing this text this morning.

And the highly anticipated climate talks in Paris this week add their own element of angst.

I'm reading a book by Swedish scientist Johan Rockström these days called Big World/Small Planet. The basic premise of the book is that the Holocene Period, a period of tremendous stability and natural harmony for our planet that began roughly 11,000 years ago after the last ice age, is ending.

And we're entering what has been dubbed the Anthropocene Epoch (anthropos = human), the epoch of massive human impacts on Earth.

**“Our way of life,” says Rockström, in what is fast becoming the consensus point of view, “is threatening to trigger catastrophic tipping points that could knock the planet out of its stable state.”**

There is still hope for a balanced and even abundant future on Earth, he writes, but that hope must be built upon the recognition of nine fundamental, measurable boundaries within which we humans must choose to live.<sup>1</sup>

**By so many measures, in so many ways, our world is out of balance.**

Foundations that once seemed solid are shaking. Institutions that were once trustworthy have lost their shine. Rhetoric is hardening; gulfs are widening; and fear is trying to seize the wheel and steer us away from the “better angels of our nature.”

**The reactionary stance against receiving Syrian refugees is a case in point.**

Some of you here today remember well the last time our country chose a stance of fear rather than principle. In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, citizens of Japanese ancestry, it was determined, could not be trusted. They were forced to leave their homes, farms, businesses, and communities and to be shipped off to concentration camps for the duration of the war. It was the wrong decision. And one that we regret to this day.

**I wonder—when it comes to Syrian refugees, are we going to allow irrational fear to take the driver’s seat again?**

**When Jesus says, PEOPLE WILL FAINT FROM FEAR AND FOREBODING OF WHAT IS COMING UPON THE WORLD, we have to wonder—if this is the direction we’re heading, what are we to make of it all?**

**Now, a careful reading of the gospel is important here. Apocalyptic writings like what we find before us are notoriously difficult to pin down.**

Richly symbolic and multilayered, and at the same time rooted in historical events of their own time, writings like the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Luke were written primarily to bolster hope among the faithful —not to instill fear—as people of faith sought to live their lives consistent with the teaching of Jesus as a minority community in a culture that was hostile to them.

The point of the teaching isn’t to inflame the crisis. The point is to keep your head and act out the ethic Jesus taught and lived with confidence that this is exactly what God intends for you to do.

**Henri Nouwen puts it this way:**

[As] we wait... for the coming of Jesus, [we wait] in the conviction that we have already seen God’s footsteps...As we wait, we remember him for whom we are waiting, and as we remember him we create a community ready to welcome him when he comes.<sup>2</sup>

Any community ready to welcome Jesus must make room for refugees, including Syrian refugees. To compromise our faith for the sake of fear-laced political expediency is to miss Jesus’ point entirely.

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Rockström and Mattias Klum, *Big World Small Planet...*

<sup>2</sup> Nouwen

The story is told that 235 years ago the Connecticut House of Representatives was in session on a bright day in May when something happened that nobody expected. In the midst of debate, the sky inexplicably turned dark, making it difficult for the legislators to continue their work.

**A clamor arose.** Some thought it was an eclipse of the sun. Others thought it was the second coming. In the wake of circumstances they could not understand, members of the House voted to adjourn and rushed home to their families.

But over in the State Senate, Senator Abraham Davenport had a different response.

**We are all upset by the darkness**, he said, **and some of us are afraid. But “the Day of the Lord is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. And if the Lord is returning, I, for one, choose to be found doing my duty. I therefore ask that candles be brought.”<sup>3</sup>**

**Today’s gospel surely does issue warnings to the faithful about Christ’s return. But the voice undergirding those warnings is a voice not of FEAR but of HOPE. Two examples.**

**(1) First, in verse 28, after a long list of woes, Jesus sums it all up by saying:**

**NOW WHEN THESE THINGS BEGIN TO TAKE PLACE, STAND UP AND RAISE YOUR HEADS, BECAUSE YOUR REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR...**

**That which God has been working toward since the dawn of time, the new order which all creation has been groaning and laboring to see, the promised fulfillment of all God’s hopes and dreams for the world, is coming into being at last. Are we supposed to find a hiding place and cower away in fear? NO! Stand up and raise your heads, says Jesus...**

**(2) Second example, verse 33: HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY, says Jesus, BUT MY WORDS WILL NOT PASS AWAY.**

Which is to say, the enduring Word of wisdom and grace spoken by God from the beginning of time; that Word which became flesh in Jesus, that aching Word of love that found its deepest expression in the humility and forsakenness the cross, will endure beyond all the vicissitudes of human struggle and human history. Indeed this Word and his teachings will never pass away.

**Now chances are, the crises you and I experience personally are played out on a much smaller scale than what Jesus describes or what our world presently is facing.**

Relationships gone bad; health concerns on the rise; issues at work and troubles with children; struggles with addiction and depression; challenges paying the mortgage.

**These may not be epic to anyone else, but they sure feel epic to us when we’re the ones being kept up at night.**

Against this backdrop Jesus’ words of admonition in verse 34, to not be weighed down by the worries of this life seem, at first, to be so feeble. Until we realize that the only thing we really are in charge of in this life is the attitude and the choices with which we engage the world.

**Try as we might**, we can’t control how our family members act or neighbors behave, or whether our colleagues appreciate us or not.

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<sup>3</sup> Read more about the story and proposed cause @ <http://www.johnhorrigan.com/darkday.html>

Though we may wish it, especially around the holidays, we have no voice in determining who are relatives are, much less the state of national security or the pace of climate change.

As we wait for Christ this Advent, his invitation is to begin here, within ourselves, to orient our lives toward a promise worth living for.

**The upshot of the gospel—the real GOOD NEWS—is that no matter what the size of the canvass on which we live our lives, we live them faithfully in this MEANTIME because we know the one who holds us in the ENDTIME.<sup>4</sup>**

HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY, Jesus promises, BUT MY WORDS WILL NOT PASS AWAY.

**The surest sign of this truth this morning is not a cosmic sign, but this community—**you and I together, gathered here around the Table; coming together to receive Christ's promise in bread and wine, and to support each other day by day, week by week, as we make our way together on this venture called life.

As we wait this Advent, we remember him for whom we are waiting, and we create a community ready to welcome him when he comes.

LET US PRAY:

Almighty and Altender God, to you belongs all our beginnings and all our endings.

So, shape our lives this day with hope. Nourish us with your body and blood of your Son Jesus, that we might in turn stand with and for one another and with/for our neighbors and with/for all who long for safety; testifying with our lives each day to the hope that is in us, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Wesley D. Avram, from *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*. Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2009, page 22.