

Over the past week and a half, while struggling to get well after being quite ill, I became increasingly aware of the way we are living in a time of tension between the quarantine lockdown of 2020 and a hopeful future time when we **might, just might** move beyond Covid-19. This present time is fraught with disease, danger, and chaos. And, what is blatantly and manifestly clear is that full recovery and a return to normal will **not** come to fruition until more people get vaccinated. So, we indefinitely live in what might be called "*in-between times*."

Today marks the beginning of a new church year and, on this first Sunday of the new year, we are reminded of the way we live within the tension of yet **another** form of *in-between times*. As Christians, we live between the "Already" and "the Not yet" ... that is, between "the Kingdom that **has** come" and the "Kingdom that is **yet to fully come**." We live in "in-between times." As we begin the season of Advent, we are invited to look in *two* directions – to look back to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and to look forward to Jesus' return when he will bring God's kingdom on earth to fulfillment at the end of time. Therefore, Advent begins with a reading that looks toward Jesus' **return**. In other words, we begin this season by looking

deep into the future – to the end of time. And, today, as we begin traveling through the gospel of Luke, we are given a cosmic picture, one that reaches out in time, incorporating the end of history. We are given words that remind us to be watchful, to be alert and be ready, **not** for the coming of a baby, but for the second coming of Christ. These are words about the end of time as we know it and, yes, there will be an end, whether it is the end of our lives, or the ultimate end of the world.

This section of Jesus' speech from the temple in Jerusalem is full of frightening images, confusing metaphors, and shocking admonitions. As we begin our journey to the manger, we do **not** encounter the sweet baby Jesus people wait for during this season. Instead, we encounter a stern, adult Jesus, picturing the whole universe being shaken and turned upside down. Quite honestly, it is not a passage most preachers are thrilled to explore, especially at a time when faith communities are full of people who cannot understand why the church "cannot just get on to Christmas already!"

Luke's gospel was written around 80 CE and the people to whom Luke was writing had already seen the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. They had waited and waited for Jesus' promised

return, but they had not seen it happen. Life for them was difficult and chaotic as Christians were facing persecution. They were truly struggling with “**the when**” of Jesus’ promised return. Luke addresses this, but he does not give the specific **time** when Jesus will return. Rather, Luke stretches out that time indefinitely. In today’s reading, Jesus’ words provide assurance that there **will** be chaos – chaos in the heavens above and chaos in the sea below. Luke’s Jesus tells us the powers of the world **will** be shaken. The Greek word used for “world” is *oikoumene*, a word that specifically means the political and economic realm. This is a word that intentionally addresses the powers of the empire, the political and economic powers of the nations. And, he tells the people to look up and raise their heads because an end **will** come and there **will** be redemption, liberation and freedom.

Today, as we begin a new church year, our world is plagued and overwhelmed by Covid-19. The world is beset by warring factions. Political parties are increasingly divided, and bitterness towards others spews out of people’s mouths like venom. We have seen violent, gun carrying, homegrown terrorists violently attacking innocent people in our streets and even at our nation’s capital, while

at the same time, attempting to create fear. Rampant greed has and continues to create growing economic disparity. Mass shootings have become routine, everyday experiences. Systemic racism is a driving factor in the function of every structure and system. Climate change is upon us. The fear in people's lives is palpable as we face an uncertain future. Oh, yes, how we **long** and yearn for God's presence, how we **yearn** for a different way. Oh, how we **long** for "justice and righteousness in the land." And, as we wait and yearn for an end to evil and sorrow, we wonder how are we to **live**? Jesus says to us, "Now when these things begin to take place, **stand up** and **raise your heads**, because your redemption is drawing near."

Just what do Jesus' words mean for us as **we** wait for Christ to come, for Christ's advent among us? Well, the truth is, if Advent is anything, it is a season of **painful** waiting **in** the world while not becoming detached **from** the world. It is a season of darkness before the light comes; a season about a future that is not yet, but a future in which redemption is "drawing near." As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Advent is like sitting in a prison cell. One cannot do anything except hope, pray and wait; deliverance must come from the outside."

For Christians, we live our lives reminding each other to not cower in fear but to **stand up and raise our heads**, for our redemption has **already** drawn near in Jesus. As Christians, we are called to **boldly** stand up and raise our heads. Yes, stand and do not fear! Do not fear because fear is more dangerous than violence. Do not fear because fear causes us to forget our identity as named and claimed children of God. Do not fear because fear causes us to see people in need as the enemy. Do not fear because fear causes us to place our safety and comfort above the needs of those who suffer. Do not fear because fear leads us to betray our most cherished values. Do not fear because, today, Jesus reminds us that **he** is the Lord of history, and **he** is the one who **will** bring all things to a **good** end.

In this in-between time, a time fraught with chaos, foreboding events, and tensions of all kinds, we wait also knowing this time is infused with **hope** and **courage** because we **already** know the end of the story! While not yet here, the end has **already** been written by the resurrected Christ and **God has this**. God's redemption will come!

Yes, as we live during these "in between times" and as we continue to wait, we stand with courage, sharing and living out the compassion and love of Christ. We stand with courage as we treat **all**

persons with the love of God because we **have** known and **continue** to know God's love. We stand and raise our heads because, as we live together within the context of Christian community, we can be a place of **light** in the darkness. We can be a place of **hope, courage** and **confidence** because God's presence shines in the darkness and the darkness has **not** overcome God's presence. We courageously stand together, affirming time itself as **God's** home and workplace, not a calendar of accumulating years but as a movement toward the fulfillment of God's dream for **all** people. We stand together as a community, affirming our trust in God's promises, past, present, and future.

As we live during these *in-between times*, Jesus' words to us today are all about the faithfulness of God. They are **not** words of terror. They are words of hope and promise. And, the promise is, "Yes. There will be an end. God is coming! The future reign of God is definitely coming. Justice, hope, and love are on the way. But, in the meantime, God **is** at work and very present, in the chaos, **in spite of all appearances to the contrary**. Be watchful, be alert, and be ready. For no one knows the time or when, but there will be an end and the reign of Christ is coming!"