

ALTERNATIVE TO FEAR

I Advent – C

December 2, 2018

Luke 21:25-36

*Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection alert us to the threatening dangers of our sins, and redeem us for your life of justice, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.*

We have come to a new church year: Today is the First Sunday of Advent. The Prayer of the Day asks for the merciful protection of The Coming One, not to help us avoid terrible things, but rather to “redeem us for *your* life of justice.” Our Lord promises to bring us through whatever may happen in order that we will live a life that is focused outward, for the good of all.

We begin *The Year of Luke* near the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, just verses down the page from the story of the widow who gave all that she had, and the disciples noticing the big and beautiful stones of the Temple. They parallel what we read from Mark’s gospel just a few weeks ago. Now we are learning that, stone by stone, the great Temple will come down, wars and insurrections will take place, and the price of being faithful to Jesus will be persecution and even death.

Yet Jesus tells his disciples that amid the signs, they should hold their heads high, “because your redemption is drawing near.” Instinctively, we would likely hole-away and hide from such fearful things; but Jesus tells us there is a better way. It involves trust and even vulnerability. But this is the way God will declare to the world that its powers cannot overcome God’s might and God’s plan for creation. The gospels reveal that Jesus makes good on the promise that nothing, not even death, can separate us from God’s love.

But it’s not just about us. Equally important is that, when we lift our heads and face the worst of what the world may offer, we can’t help but look around, and pay attention to the world around us. While that won’t eliminate evil and sadness, it will help us move outward, focus beyond ourselves, speak against the powers of doubt and darkness, and be about the business of helping make God’s kingdom (the ultimate reign of God over all things) known and real, especially for those who need to hear words of Good News. We proclaim the story of God incarnate—God with us—in Jesus. That is the story of God who doesn’t remain distant, but rather gets involved with what God made and called “good.”

While our calling to share the good news and do the work of making God’s reign real puts us “out there” and risks a confrontation with the powers of this earth, Jesus assures that the kingdoms of the world do not define us, nor can they overpower us. “Lift up your heads,” Jesus says. Which is really Jesus echoing the voice of the heavenly visitor to Mary, the voice of angels to shepherds, and even his own words to those rendered astounded and fearful by his power and presence. He is, in fact, telling us yet again: Do not be afraid!

Across Scripture, there are “more than 120 times...some angel or priest or prophet or absolutely ordinary person says, usually on behalf of God, ‘Do not fear!’” [David Lose: “In the Meantime,” for Dec. 2, 2018, at www.davidlose.net]. With wars and rumors of wars, destruction of that which we thought would last forever, and other frightening things, it seems hard to avoid being afraid. Yet, it’s easy to let our fear control us, define us, and defeat us.

Jesus understands our human tendency to pile fear upon fear to the point where we are afraid to do anything. While there are real, tangible threats we should pay attention to, sometimes, fear takes hold of us (and freezes us into inaction) for reasons we can't explain.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, our 32nd President, in his 1933 inaugural address, spoke to a nation that had witnessed a stock market collapse, and was fearful of rising tyrannical foreign powers: “This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that *the only thing we have to fear is fear itself*—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory.” [FDR’s Inaugural Address, at historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057/]

On Friday, our 41st President, George H. W. Bush, died at the age of 94. Those who have paid tribute to him recalled his grace under fire, including his calm management of his role as vice-president who became acting President, in the aftermath of attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan.

An article in the Los Angeles Times noted that Bush, on Air Force Two in Texas, was informed of the President’s condition and quickly came to realize the full weight of his role of stepping in. He chose to not be helicoptered to the White House to not raise [the nation’s] alarm, and out of respect to Nancy Reagan, whose bedroom window was near the South Lawn.” While he took on the acting leadership role, he got an update on Reagan’s condition “assuring the world that Reagan was doing better and the U.S. government was functioning.” [Del Quinton Wilber, Los Angeles Times, 12/01/18]

The words “Do not be afraid,” I suspect, guided Mr. Bush a number of times throughout his life. And I’m sure being able to set his doubts and fears aside allowed him to reassure the nation and to be ready to assume greater responsibility. Later, he would take on the role of President of the United States, a position that required making tough decisions with *the good of the many* as the guiding principle. Taking on great responsibility means allowing our faith to lift us above our fears, especially when we are responsible for the lives of others.

Jesus, in today’s gospel, assures his friends that whenever and wherever, we meet challenges, we face fears, we are threatened by our own mortality, or we witness injustice—we can hold our heads up and offer up (and live out) an alternative to fear. We need that alternative, because giving in to fear drives mistrust, suspicion, jealousy, and hatred. We are gifted and called to be better than that. We can, instead, be the voice of calm confidence, wise instruction and, when necessary, we can be the voice of the prophet and call out the wrongs we witness. In this way, we bring the hope of Advent to a world that needs to know Good News. We bring calm to people caught up in fear; and we help open their eyes to the witness of the faithful and the glimpses of the kingdom in their midst. Hope comes when we raise our heads so that negativity and injustice and fear do not freeze us into inaction. Hope comes when we anticipate with joy The Coming One—at the end of the age as “the Son of Man coming in a cloud”—or at the beginning of a new church year when we prepare to greet again the child who was laid in a manger.

Whether we think of Jesus’ coming long ago, his coming again to us this Christmas, or his final coming at the end of the age, we can raise our heads because of the Good News: Fear not. Our redemption is drawing near. Amen.

