

Sermon – LFLC November 28, 2021

The Gospel passage for Advent 1 is always a bit of a surprise. We feel we should be going back – to the prophets, to the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. But instead we are given a vision of the future – a vision that is quite terrifying.

The genre of the Luke 21 text is Apocalyptic – and there is no shortage of movies these days that feature superheroes and apocalyptic scenarios. So the word ‘apocalypse’ for us, takes on the sense of catastrophe, violence, dread only to be overcome by some super-human hero who saves the day.

(Or something like that – it is not my personal movie choice!)

But the word ‘apocalypse’ actually means to reveal, as we call John’s Apocalypse the ‘Revelation to John’ – the revealing of end times.

To us, Apocalyptic seems very weird. But it was not uncommon in Jesus’ day at all.

Please bear with me as I share some history. The nation of Israel was conquered by the Babylonians around 590 BC; the Babylonians were later defeated by the Persians; who were displaced by the Greeks, who were displaced by the Romans.

For about 600 years, dissent or opposition against the occupying powers was to risk your life. So apocalyptic literature became a means of subversion – of criticizing the powers without their knowledge – of inculcating hope in conquered peoples.

So apocalyptic is full of codes, secret meanings, symbols, numerology which many people understood.

- The second half of the Book of Daniel is apocalyptic, as is much of Zechariah – in those cases, coded subversion aimed at the Greek rulers.

- Catholic Bibles contain the Apocrypha, literature from between the closing of Malachi and the coming of Jesus about 300 years – full of apocalyptic passages.

(Aside: the Rabbis of the 1st-2nd centuries after Christ did not accept these writings as canonical – so neither did Luther or Calvin – but they can of course be read.)

Jesus knew this language. So when he spoke of the crises to come, rather than naming the Romans, he named nations fighting other nations ending with the desolation of Israel.

We'll take a breath . . .

You might say we are experiencing a form of apocalypse in the world these days:

- Covid 19
- Climate Crisis – BC is in the grip of this!
- Hatred of 'the other'
- Violence against 'the other'
- Growth of authoritarianism and promotion of outright lies
- Terrible, vicious civil wars

And think of what we have already lost – that's a personal question for you to ponder:

- Death of loved ones
- Isolation
- Freedom to travel
- Loss of work
- Optimism – dare I say 'Hope'?

The theme of Advent 1 is Hope –

Paul in his hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13 says:

3 things endure – faith, hope and love – the greatest of these is love.

There is that little word – HOPE – that endures until Christ shall come again.

In our study group on Tuesday we talked about Hope:

Hope – NOT wishful thinking – not the letter to Santa – not the 649 ticket in your glove compartment . . .

We talked about Hope's opposite – Despair. Henri Nouwen says the opposite of hope is Fatalism.

Despair, fatalism – they lead us down a slippery slope. They turn us inward, breed anger, resentment and suspicion – we just want to give up. We buy an old Bare Naked Ladies CD and sing along with 'If I had a Million Dollars' – well – I'd just move to . . . well, where is it safe these days?

(A certain member of this congregation told me she had given up on a nice holiday far away and resigned herself to a short visit to Powell Riviera!)

Jesus breaks the tension with a little parable of the fig tree. We are not to give up, but be watchful – to see the signs that begin to appear.

We all love to take walks here on the Sunshine Coast – what are we noticing? A summer of drought and a late autumn of torrential rain and floods. So much devastation of farmland, towns, roads.

The world is in a climate crisis and the signs are everywhere.

Did God cause this apocalyptic age we are entering?

This is why we have to be very careful reading these Apocalyptic Texts in the modern age. It is easy to leap to the conclusion that an angry, vengeful God is wreaking havoc upon the earth.

How do we square divine anger of God who also sends the Eternal Son into the world to bring peace and fulness of life?

I think we need to go back to the beginning – that God created this earth as a home for life in abundance – life that has evolved for millions of years. Scripture affirms God's delight in creation calling it GOOD.

What we are experiencing in the world today is not God's wrath, but the consequences of our own greed and idolatry. We would need 2-3 Planet Earths to supply all the world's population with the standard of living we enjoy in a developed country.

I think God weeps.

There is all manner of crises facing our planet, but the most serious is spiritual. Like the builders of the Tower of Babel, we have tried to climb to heaven – or rather to create our own heaven on earth.

The passage ends with an ethical note. Beware of the local pub or the coffee circle if there is only negativity. No, be alert. Our faith, our mental and physical strength will be challenged.

Stay alert, be strong, have hope.

2 points to close:

- This time of crisis is also opportunity to throw off what just burdens us: outdated attitudes; unreasonable desires for stuff.
- And it is the time to reorient our life to what matters; what is the rock, the foundation upon which you are standing just now?

Where are you placing your Hope? In whom are you placing your hope?

Despair is tapping us on one shoulder and fatalism on the other.

Peter writes in his Epistle that by the mercy of God in Jesus Christ we are given birth into a living hope.

It is the blessing we need AND it is the good news we carry in our hearts as we move among people who have sunk into despair and fatalism – who desperately need Good News.

Hope is our gift to share.

Hope – born in us through the mercies of God – the energy of love that this wounded world so deeply needs.