

A Surprising God

Jeremiah 33:14-16; I Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

First Sunday of Advent, (Nov. 28) 2021

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The style [of the Bible] is of the battlefield rather than the cloister.

- Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*

*I advise everybody, to be a little careful when they go along there – best stay woke,
keep their eyes open.*

- Huddie Ledbetter, “Lead Belly,” from the song “Scottsboro Boys,” 1938

One of my favorite Wendell Berry short stories is called, “Drouth.” Set in 1944, it’s told from the perspective of little boy Andy who was staying on his grandparent’s farm. The country was in the middle of a significant drouth and as Andy remembered, “Until it finally rained again, something fundamental seemed to have gone wrong with the world.” The long-term lack of rain prompted the old people on the farm to reminisce about other drouths and other times, the hardships they had faced, and the dread and fear of the unknown.

Andy remembered, “We expected, or at least I did, the end of the world.”

Andy’s grandfather tended to be stoical about the drouth and resigned to whatever comes. He tended to simply put his head down and work. Dick Watson, an African American hired hand, shared much of the same resignation but tried to see the occasional humor in it.

Andy's grandmother, on the other hand, tended to read the Bible in one hand while reading the signs of the skies and the times in the other. She thought about the end of the world a lot, and in times of unusual weather she dwelt upon it, with a certain sense of foreboding.

And then there was Aunt Sarah Jane, wife of hired-hand Dick Watson, who also was thoughtful about the end of the world, and also knew her Bible. Berry writes, "But whereas Grandma regarded it with some deep disturbance of temporality and dread, Aunt Sarah Jane, who held it sufficiently in fear, also looked upon it with some approval as the time when justice would rain down at last." ("Drouth" in *A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port William Membership* by Wendell Berry, pp. 88-97).

Our reading from Luke, this First Sunday of Advent, most likely prompts dread and foreboding. A good question to ask ourselves this morning as we reflect on these disturbing texts, is how much are we like Grandma and how much are we like Aunt Sarah Jane, "who held it sufficiently in fear, also looked upon it with some approval as the time when justice would rain down at last"?

Our social location says much about how we read the Bible, especially these old stories about the end of the world, when we are in crisis, when we feel out of control, and we are afraid. Aunt Sarah Jane, though she shared a certain amount of fear along with Grandma, knew these old stories were telling about the end of an old world of injustice and racism and violence and they were foretelling that God is bringing a new world.

A friend of mine likes to say we must watch out for getting the Stockholm Syndrome where we become friends and identify with our captors. We are captive to Sin and Death with injustice and violence, racism, and division. Let's not become comfortable with the way things are. Aunt Sarah Jane knew enough to not be comfortable with the status quo.

The first Sunday of Advent always has us reading these hard texts from Luke or Mark or Matthew. Like the readers of these New Testament passages, we are in crisis. For the first time in planetary history, scientists say we are living in the Anthropocene geological epoch. It is so called because humanity is now the dominant force responsible for alteration of the Earth, land, ocean, atmosphere, and life systems. In all previous Earth history, human beings were but a small influence in the vast natural world. Now, all that has changed, and human beings are the dominant influence in everything that is going on from the cellular to the planetary. One of the marks of the Anthropocene is the confluence of many factors and multiple crises, all due in one way or another to human influence: carbon use and the rising planetary temperatures, melting of the ice caps, the rising of the sea level, the increase in extreme weather patterns, drought, famine, hunger, people in poverty looking for relief and as a result the rapid increase of refugees and immigration, the rise in nationalism as people seek to stop immigration, violence, wars, building walls, carrying guns, insecurity, fear, disease and pandemics (who knows the influence of the changing climate on pathogens?), political instability, people demanding change while other people are fighting change, racism and people becoming more and more aware of the systemic nature of racism...

You get the idea. Like the hearers of our reading from Luke 21, we are in a time of crisis. We are out of control, and we are afraid. This world is changing.

New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says that this passage from Luke concerns the “worldwide experience of humans at the judgment.” It is a judgment that is cosmological and ecological. What the Bible teaches, and what we modern people have conveniently forgotten, is that we human beings are part of God’s creation. We’re all tied up together; our fates are bound together. The old teaching is that our human sin shows up in the heavens and the earth.

Our Advent text from Luke 21 has Jesus speaking to us, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (21:25-26). Just a few verses before, he says, “There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven” (21:11).

Jesus does not say that God causes these things. He says that when these things occur, we need to look, pay attention, wake up, and watch. When the “powers of the heavens” are shaken, when the Principalities and Powers that seek control and rule, are stretched beyond their breaking point, then we followers of Jesus can see more clearly the in-breaking redemption of Christ Jesus. It’s apocalyptic. It’s an unveiling so we can see what previously we’ve been deluded into not seeing by snoozing our way through life. We are called to wake up and open our eyes to the true work of Christ.

Jesus in Luke says that we are to be alert and be on guard. Matthew and Mark say we need to wake up. Again and again, Jesus uses the same urgent word,

“Wake up!” which is the same word Jesus uses over in the Garden of Gethsemane when he is in agonizing prayer while the cross looms over him. He tells the disciples to stay awake and watch and pray with him. He is in crisis. In fact, the entire cosmos is in crisis. Jesus is in a fight with the Powers of Death and Sin and Evil – if he takes up arms and uses violence, Death and Sin and Evil wins. If he runs Death and Sin and Evil win. But if he faces the Powers of Death in the Cross, and embraces it, trusting the Living God to bring about goodness, and hope and redemption even though Death and Evil mean it for bad, then God’s Way will win. Yet, he must enter the torture, pain, Sin, and Death of the cross with nothing more than trusting God. He must not only face Death; he must die. And while he is praying with sweat like drops of blood falling from him, his disciples are nearby sleeping through it all. He implores them, “Wake up!” He implores us, “Wake up! Pay attention to what is going on! Read the signs. The Powers of Death are at work, but God is at work, too!

To use the contemporary term, Jesus says we need to be “woke!” Be woke to what is going on and how we got here and what we can do about it. Woke to how the Powers of Sin and Death want to keep us sleeping while they do their work of destroying the entire planet. Woke to the abuse and diminishment, division and destruction that Death perpetrates, and while we sleepily go through our days, we become convinced that it’s all normal – we become friends with it all. Meanwhile the planet is dying – because of Death. Young black men and women are shot and lynched and if they were not on videoed, no one would even notice.

In 1931 nine black teenage boys were accused of raping two white women and they were tried in Scottsboro, Alabama. The nine boys were all found guilty even though it was proven there was no rape, and the women confessed to

fabricating the whole thing. In 1938 the folk and blues singer Lead Belly wrote a song called “The Scottsboro Boys,” in which he sings that when going through Alabama, “I advise everybody, to be a little careful when they go along there – best stay woke, keep their eyes open.”

Stay woke, open our eyes to what Death and Evil and Sin are doing.

In the late 1500’s a small German village was overcome with a pandemic that was killing almost a third of the population of Europe. Pastor Phillip Nicolai did countless funerals as he laid to rest church member after church member, friends, and family members. Nicolai sat down and wrote a hymn of hope that several years later Johann Sebastian Bach took and wrote the music to what we translate as, “Sleepers awake!” Using the imagery of Jesus’s parable of the ten wise and ten foolish virgins, Nicolai wrote, “Awake, calls the voice to us of the watchmen high up in the tower; awake ... Midnight the hour is named; they call to us with bright voices; Make yourselves ready for the wedding, you must go to meet Him.”

In other words, wake up, be woke, the Living God is coming.

We are to wake up, be alert to what Death and Darkness are doing and what they would prefer we sleep through. But more – we are to wake up to God!

In Christ’s apocalyptic words recorded in Luke, Jesus speaks of the “distress of nations” and “fear and foreboding.” But in the midst of all this, we are invited to “look up and raise [our] heads, because [our] redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:25, 28). Luke, Matthew, and Mark, all tell us Jesus calls us to wake up to God.

God is a surprising God! Who knows what will happen? God works in unexpected ways. Isaiah said, “Do not remember the former things, God says, ‘I am about to do a new thing’” (Is. 43:18-19).

God surprised in the beginning. When God created, God created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. It was all an act of grace, all a total surprise done out of love. When the Israelites were backed up against the Red Sea and the mighty Egyptian army was bearing down on them, God surprised them by parting the waters. When the giant warrior Goliath came at the cowering Israelite army, God called a small teenage boy named David to defeat him. Wise Men came from the East looking for the new Messiah. They had their charts and horoscopes and ended up at the royal palace in Jerusalem. They were surprised that God took on human flesh in a baby born in a cow shed in a run-down forgotten little wide place in the road named Bethlehem.

And in the greatest surprise of all, women overwhelmed and traumatized by the torture and gruesome death on a cross of their rabbi Jesus, go to the tomb to anoint his body. At the last minute they are further traumatized realizing they can't roll back the massive stone covering the tomb entrance. “What's the use?! We can't win for losing. The Powers always win and then rub it in.” Yet on that Easter morning, they are surprised not only that the stone is rolled away, but the tomb is empty, and Jesus is risen!

Everything we believe about God and everything at the heart of Advent is about this surprising God we know in Christ. We read and face climate change and pandemics, racism, wars, and rumors of wars, and on and on. Jesus says,

remember, God is not finished with his old world and with us. I am convinced God will surprise us even in this Anthropocene Epoch.

This does not mean, we can chill, go back to sleep and trust that God will pull our fat out of the fire. It means we are called to wake up, get involved, and join God in the great work of redemption and hope, justice and peace.

That is the Advent message: In a world of profound darkness and distress, pervasive sin and evil, we look to the one true light—Christ Jesus, the Son of God.

It is Advent time. Time to take down the pretensions, time to come to terms with the painful truth, time to confess our failures, time to wake up and smell the coffee. The Powers of Darkness and Evil are working hard but God is not finished.

It is Advent time. Time for God to complete what God started in our lives and in this world in the first place. To finish creating and making and fashioning us, and bringing this new world, this kingdom of God into being, to bring about healing and hope, to repair the brokenness, and let justice rain down like a mighty stream.

Look up, take heart! Wake up and have hope!

Lift up your heads. No longer look to yourself. Lift up your heads. We are not in control but neither are the Powers of Death and Sin. Lift up your heads. God is coming. Lift up your heads. We are defeated and have failed, but God is coming. Lift up your heads. We are down and depressed and disturbed....

“Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in.”

“Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle!”

“Lift up your heads, O gates! . . . Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory” (Psalm 24: 7-10).

Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.