

A Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-27, 32-37

The First Sunday of Advent, (Dec.3) 2023

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Whole lotta shakin' goin' on

-Jerry Lee Lewis

Last year, I awoke from a coma that had lasted for 18 years. The coma was called "my life."

-Freshman college student essay opening sentence

Advent is not for the faint of heart. The word "advent" means "coming" and it's full of hard scriptures, wild prophets, apocalyptic signs and portents, judgement, and calls to repentance. Advent begins with the world as we know it being shaken. Indeed, the entire cosmos will be shaken.

Advent is a time of tension. It's the "in between time." The church proclaims Christ has come. Christ comes. And Christ will come again. Part of the tension is living in the between these comings and learning to watch and be alert for the various ways Christ comes.

This time of the year, we feel it especially in the tension between Advent in church with the Christmas creep of consumerism going on around us. Advent calls us to prayer and to practice waiting and watching, patience and hope, while around us is shopping, buying, decorating, and frantic busy-ness. Advent calls us wait and

watch while we also have fifty things to do – like today. It’s hard and we feel the tension.

We feel the tension and the stress at church but also at home. We are busily getting ready for family obligations with all sorts of expectations. All the while dealing with divisions and hurt feelings that often go under the radar but now can burst onto the surface. And for many of us, Advent brings grief to the surface. It’s a hard time. It is not for the faint of heart.

Advent is also about living without control and that’s hard. Yesterday Jane picked up a nail in a tire out at the Caddo Mounds State Historic Site and by the time she got home she had a flat – on a Saturday afternoon. I worked for 45 minutes trying to figure out how to take apart the newfangled jack and wrench from the trunk. Finally, Jane said, “Let’s just call AAA,” which she did. But the revelation/apocalypse for me is how angry I was. I was not angry at Jane. I was just angry about the whole thing. And if it happens to Jane or the girls, I’m even more mad. I know my anger is about fear and safety and therefore control. Car trouble for Jane was out of my control and it shook me up.

If such a simple thing as unexpected car trouble makes me angry, what about people who perceive, rightly or wrongly, that they are losing control in our society and losing control of their lives and livelihood? They are fearful and angry. The road rage, the political anger, suspicion of others who are not like them and from whom they feel threatened, the frustration of White people over our changing demographics and population in Texas, and on and on.

Advent says we are not in control. Everything is all shook up. Our calling is learning to wake up and watch for God in it all. Don't give into the rage; be alert for God.

Advent brings tension, change. We're in between the old age of Sin and Death and Domination that is passing away, and the new age or New Creation in Christ Jesus that is breaking in. Indeed, in the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ, the New Creation has invaded this old system, with the church being the vanguard of the invasion. Meanwhile, the Powers and Systems of Death and Domination fight a rearguard battle to hold on.

When we come to the 1st Sunday of Advent every year, I remember the scene in the original 1984 *Ghostbusters* movie. You remember – the city of New York is in a panic. Weird things are happening. The mayor has a big meeting and the Ghostbusters are shuffled in:

The Dan Ackroyd character says, "This city is headed for a disaster of biblical proportions.

And the mayor responds: What do you mean, "biblical"?

Another Ghostbuster says, "What he means is Old Testament, Mr. Mayor, real wrath-of-God type stuff!"

"Fire and brimstone coming down from the sky! Rivers and seas boiling!

"Forty years of darkness! Earthquakes, volcanoes!"

"The dead rising from the grave!"

And the Bill Murray character shouts, "Human sacrifice! Dogs and cats, living together! Mass hysteria!"

The movies, like most all popular depictions of the apocalyptic show us terrible and scary things happening because of evil or something strange is in our neighborhood. But the New Testament is saying God is coming and shaking things up and making all things right and good and just. The God who loves us is relentless in saving us and making things right. Yes, the cosmos is being shaken, the Powers of Domination and Death are being shaken. Our world and present institutions are being shaken. Our church is being shaken. Our lives are being shaken.

There's a whole lotta shakin going on!

Welcome to Advent.

Theologian James McClendon said that in reading the Bible, and especially in reading these apocalyptic passages in the Gospels, we must learn to read with tri-focal lenses. We read in the context of when it was written. We read in the context of what will happen in the future. But most importantly, we read with what's happened in between, especially with today in front of us. Part of the challenge is learning to keep all these perspectives together at one time.

Which is part of what Mark has us doing with Jesus in today's reading. Mark records Jesus and his disciples coming out of the Temple after he has been there teaching. All of this is going on during Jesus' last week before his arrest and crucifixion so his conflict with the religious and political authorities is building. Due to a comment by one of the disciples about how great and enduring the Temple is Jesus responds with a teaching that one of these days this great building and larger than life institution will be nothing but rubble.

Jesus says, “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Truly Human One coming in clouds’ with great power and glory...” He goes on, “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come... And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake” (Mk. 13: 24-37).

Notice, most likely Mark records all this roughly about 40 years later, somewhere during the late 60’s or early 70’s. He has Jesus’ words but he’s remembering them in his present context. And his context was the Jewish Revolt against the Romans and the Roman counter-offensive to retake Jerusalem. Rome did retake Jerusalem in the year AD 70 and in so doing destroyed the city and destroyed the Temple, leaving nothing but smoking rubble and the western wall which we still have today. Mark is writing while he is witnessing the Jewish Revolt and he is remembering what Jesus said at the Temple years before.

During the Jewish Revolt, Jewish Zealots were going everywhere recruiting anyone to join the revolution against the Empire. They said this was the moment of the messiah. For them this fight against Rome was when God’s anointed would come and make Israel great again. The Zealots believed in using violence to force the issue. In the verses right before our reading this morning, Jesus says that there will be false prophets saying that the messiah is coming or that the messiah is here! And Jesus says, “Don’t believe it... Be alert; watch out and don’t be taken in. Watch out for leaders who want to be a messiah. Be discerning. Don’t believe everything they tell you. Don’t be taken in by what you see. Learn to see through the illusions.”

In other words, there were a lot of people angry and fed up. They knew the institutions of the Empire and the Religious/Political Authorities were failing them, and they were ready for change, they were ready for a fight, and they're looking for a messiah, looking for a leader. And then there's a war and rumors of wars, and their most zealot leaders start shouting, "This is it! This is the big one!" But Jesus says, "Be careful! Don't fall for their false rhetoric and their empty promises.

Are you listening?!

This morning the prophet Isaiah speaks to us and speaks for us to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (Is. 64:1). The testimony of the New Testament is that God hears Isaiah's plea and ours. In Jesus Christ God has actually come down among us. But his coming shook things up. During a time of crisis in the life of ancient Israel, Isaiah's cry to God was to tear open the heavens. But here in Mark, Jesus speaks of God's coming as tearing up the whole world, not just the heavens.

Jesus says God is intervening, and the Principalities and Powers of Sin, Death, and Domination are being shaken from their "heavenly thrones" (v. 13:25). Remember that the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians of our "struggle is against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places" (Eph. 6: 12).

In other words, God's intention is nothing short of cosmic. Heaven and earth being shaken as God's New Creation breaks in among us.

So Jesus is saying don't get sucked into the violent wars and rumors of wars, don't be taken in by every call that the messiah is here. All of this will pass away only when the Truly Human One comes in clouds with great power and glory and the Powers and Principalities are defeated and put back in their proper place.

And here is the heart of Mark's apocalyptic argument: the time and place where this happens is the Cross. When Jesus dies on the Cross, the sun is darkened, the cosmos is shaken, and the powers in their heavenly places are thrown down. The "End" has broken into the present at the Cross and the Resurrection. It is the purpose and culmination of all history that breaks into our world in the Cross and Resurrection. And while there is much more to come our calling as followers of Christ Jesus is to stick with him and his Way and not get sucked into the calls for violence or on the other hand, not give into imperial coma and psychic numbness.

We middle-class White folks who read books get nervous with all this apocalyptic talk. Part of what makes us nervous – and should make us nervous – is we're no longer dealing with old Fundamentalist tent-revival preachers with their crazy nationalistic apocalyptic theology. Now it's slick politicians in high offices with their crazy nationalistic apocalyptic policies. We become horrified until we are overwhelmed and then we become numbed. As Liz Cheney said this week, "We're sleepwalking toward a dictatorship." We hunker down and bunker up, drop out of volunteering, and hold on to what money we have.

But Jesus says, "Wake up! Be alert! Change is coming when you weren't expecting it! God is coming! God's New Creation is invading."

A professor friend of mine told me of the best opening sentence of a freshman college student's essay he had ever read. The assignment was to write a five-page autobiography. This was how the student began his essay: "Last year, I awoke from a coma that had lasted for eighteen years. The coma was called 'my life.'"

The student went on to say how he had fallen into the hands of a gifted teacher who got in his face, grabbed him by the neck, shook him up and down, and made him take, for the first time in his life, an honest look at himself.

The teacher shook him up.

When was the last time you were shook up? And are you ready to be shaken?

God comes into this world when we least expect it. In Jesus' first Advent, Jesus showed up when people were not expecting him and in a way they surely did not expect. Throughout his ministry Jesus showed up when people were going about their daily lives, going where he was not expected, and even going where he was not wanted. It shook everyone up.

So pay attention. Expect the God who surprises us. Be alert and learn to watch for God.

Many of us get almost obsessive over today's news and politics filled with hatred, anger, and fear, and we are overwhelmed with bad news. I urge you to learn to practice the habit of looking for God – in the news, behind the news, and beyond the news. Make this is a habit. Behind all the bad news, here and there, online, in print, around town, God is at work – make it a habit to watch for God. Be alert.

This certainly does not mean you will suddenly develop a sunny personality or outlook, but it does mean you will find reasons for deep hope and resilience.

This coming Thursday will be the 43rd anniversary of my ordination. 43 years of being a pastor and preaching, 34 of them here. The other day my son-in-law Nick asked me how many sermons I thought I've preached in my life. So we

got to talking and he pulled out his phone calculator and started figuring. Come to find out I'm approaching 2,500 sermons! Wow!

A veteran pastor told me years ago, that after preaching hundreds, even thousands of sermons, he learned to whisper a little prayer to himself before preaching or before the worship service, "Lord, surprise me. Show me something I never saw before. Go ahead, I can take it." After 34 Advents with you, that's my prayer: "Lord, surprise me."

One of the favorite parts of my job, though one that is hard to fulfill, is on Sunday mornings I try to greet every each one of you, especially the children. It usually not possible because I get into numerous conversations while some of you slip out after the service. Occasionally, I'll notice a something different in your voice, some look on your face, as you hurry by. If I'm alert, I'll sometimes say, "Are you okay?" Or "What's wrong?" Perhaps I'll put my hand on your shoulder for a moment or two longer, pat on you maybe. More than once you've said to me later, "That pat on my shoulder got me through the week." Or perhaps you'll say, "Your brief prayer with me, helped me get through the MRI." What I say under my breath is, "Thank you God for helping me be alert."

68 years ago Friday Rosa Parks sat on a bus in Montgomery, AL and refused to give up her seat to the White patrons and go to the back. But it shook all of Montgomery and ended up shaking all of America before it was said and done. A new world is breaking into the old controlling world of White Supremacy and Segregation.

33 years ago, Carl Davis and his partner Bill walked into our special worship service called "A Service of Hope for Those Whose Lives Have Been Touched by

AIDS.” Eventually, they became the first gay couple to join our church – as a couple – and they gently shook us up.

Carl was HIV+ but eventually it became full-blown AIDS, nevertheless, he and Bill were in church every Sunday. Carl helped us watch for God in ways we never had before. He said himself that God healed him and made him whole here through Austin Heights, even as he was dying from AIDS. He was healed, from a self-centered wild boy to a servant-hearted, giving, other oriented, gentle, Christ-centered young gay man.

Carl said, that first evening, when they came to the special service of hope, they got to the door and froze. They didn’t know if they could do it. He said, “We were scared. We were two gay men, a couple, walking into a Baptist church in East Texas. Our stomachs were churning, we were short of breath, our hands were sweating, and we both were shaking.”

He said, “We almost turned around and went back to the car but then we felt this nudge. We couldn’t explain it and we both felt it. We just looked at one another and walked in.

That’s Advent. That’s God. You had better watch out.

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