

WAIT
December 2, 2018
Mary Koon, Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Luke 21:25-36

This morning's scripture is a strange and challenging passage from the gospel of Luke. In it, Jesus addresses his listeners and shares some disturbing images about signs that will precede the end of the age, when God's reign will be manifest in the world. It is apocalyptic – apocalypse means revelation – the revealing of God's kingdom in our world.

This gospel text cycles around every three years in the lectionary and is often ignored and for good reason. It's uncomfortable, confusing, and the images simply don't make a lot of sense in this post-modern 21st century world.

We won't do analysis and pick it apart this morning.

Rather, we'll follow the suggestion of writer William Lamar, in the *Christian Century*, who invites us to approach this apocalyptic text the way we do poetry. We do not listen to a poem demanding a literal interpretation. Rather, we let poetry wash over us, igniting memory, sound, imagination. Sometimes poetry evokes emotions that are painful, other times it is comforting, it can help us discover something of ourselves, previously unknown. Often it moves us in ways that are not entirely clear.

This sort of apocalyptic literature is filled with hyperbole and bursting with distressing images. But so is life today. One could argue that we live in apocalyptic times – the cover has been lifted on things that were once simmering under the surface in our culture, like sexual harassment, xenophobia, homophobia and racism.

So we will trust our hearts and our spirits as we hear Jesus describe images of the sun, moon, stars, the earth shaking and seas roaring. Lamar says, "Let apocalyptic do what it does. Let it challenge reason. Let it midwife

questions of what is possible and what is impossible. Let it escort us to that lovely, liminal space where prose bows in humble adoration of the poetic.”

We pick up in the text just after Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

‘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 the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.’

‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’

The Word of the Lord...thanks be to God?

Advent is the time in the life of the church when we lean in, acknowledge and embrace the universal human condition of waiting. As we heard during the Advent wreath lighting, the experience of waiting for God is all over scripture, from Israelite slaves in Egypt, to captivity in Babylon, to Roman oppression to the early Christian church waiting for Jesus to return. The psalms express the longing of those waiting for God...for mercy, for help, for healing, for victory.

Advent means coming. It is a time for preparing to celebrate, again, God's coming to earth as a babe in a manger, when Jesus ushered in God's reign, while we wait with hope for the time when we will live together in peace and systems of oppression and injustice will be transformed and God's purpose for the world, fulfilled.

It is a tricky kind of time to be in – this “already, but not yet.” And it is here – now --between the times, that Jesus' message of preparedness can speak to us.

Jesus' teaching to his disciples was not meant to terrify them – or us. Rather, it was an admonition to not get distracted and weighed down by present realities, but to stay awake for God's spirit moving in the world, to notice and participate in and work toward in God's future until it comes.

The specific day and hour of the fulfillment of God's kingdom is a mystery even to Jesus. People for centuries have tried to take biblical images and apply them to the specific politics and ecology of their day, hoping to pinpoint the exact time when the world will end. And they've all been wrong. Each and every one.

God's time is very different than human time. The Bible tells us that in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus to earth to live among us. God's time is simply not subject to hours and days, seasons and clocks the way we are.

In our passage, Jesus begins each short exhortation with a warning and ends with a promise of hope. “There will be signs in the sun, moon, stars and seas...and when the Son of Man comes in glory - hold your heads high, for redemption is coming near.” God's redemptive love is hope.

“Look for the signs of my kingdom like you look for summer in the leafing of the trees...this world will pass away, but MY word will endure forever.” God sightings are hope.

“Be on guard, don't be weighed down by worries of the present day, but be alert and pray, pray, pray so that you may stand with integrity before God.” In God alone is our hope.

God's spirit nudges into our daily lives at the moment we least expect it, but we won't recognize it if we aren't paying attention.

The practice of sacred waiting involves staying awake, being present in our lives and being present with one another. The practice of prayer not only involves heads bowed, hearts open, listening, but noticing God sightings in our lives and the world. Praying and waiting involves reflection -- hold on, was that a God sighting?

Jesus' words signal an entire world shift, but apocalyptic events happen all the time. We have seen the way marriages, families, churches and communities come together when crisis strikes, when, as Kathleen Norris says, our "faultlines are exposed" (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, "Apolcolypse").

The things we feel are hopeless in our human oriented time, are all possibilities in God's time.

Waiting is an invitation to attentiveness, a reminder that we often get so distracted by things that don't matter or have no enduring value, that we miss the gift that is God's spirit in the present moment -- those fleeting glimpses of the kingdom in our midst.

Jill Duffield of the Presbyterian outlook writes this:

On election night last month, I was flying home and waiting for my connecting flight in the bustling Atlanta airport. I sat alone eating my dinner, watching pundits predict outcomes, seeing the "breaking news" banner when polls closed. I looked forward to being obliviously in the air when definitive numbers were announced. I wondered if my hope for a less politically divided life together bordered on delusional. Behind me sat a woman working on her laptop. A young man in a janitor's uniform came to empty the trash can adjacent to the woman's table. She struck up a conversation with him. Her accent revealed her home before she told him she was from Minnesota. She asked him if he was in school. No. He had to work. He had a son on the way. "How exciting," she exclaimed. "You have no idea how much your heart will expand." She had an 18-month-old at

home, she said. They chatted and eventually she got the young man's name and address so that she could send him baby clothes her son had outgrown. "Nothing fancy," she said. "But good for every day." He thanked her, told her to have a safe flight. She wished him well. They went back to their respective work.

I got up to go to my gate but not before stopping to thank the lady. I told her I was moved by her kindness. She said, "We need to be kind to each other." As the "breaking news" boomed about red and blue races, I agreed. Neither earth nor heaven shook, nothing went dark, but that small exchange brought about a seismic shift in my attitude. Their shared humanity over impending new life bolstered my faith, and gave a glimpse of love and unity that is too often unseen. It gave me hope that redemption isn't as far away as I feared. (Jill Duffield, Presbyterian Outlook, presoutlook@pres-outlook.org, 11/25/18)

What are you waiting for this Advent? Where do you find hope these days? Perhaps this week, these two questions can be a source of prayer and conversation here and in your homes.

In a few moments we will celebrate Communion together. This meal is one of those places where time becomes very pliable as we re-member the meal that Jesus shared with his friends before he was led to the cross. As we remember Jesus, we become his literal body, and work and pray for a time when people will sit at the table of peace. This first Sunday in Advent, as we eat and drink, as we wait, we affirm our faith in the God who, in the fullness of time, will make all things new.

May it be so. Thanks be to God.

AMEN