

## Advent 1, Year C

Nov. 29, 2015

Luke 21:25-36 *Jesus said, "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 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."*

It is the First Sunday of Advent. Christmas lights are beginning to show up around town, Christmas music is being played in the stores, and children everywhere are looking forward to Santa Claus.

And what of the Church? The Church today is reading a Gospel filled with images of destruction and fear. *"Jesus said, '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.'"*

Why in the world THIS Gospel to begin our preparations for the Incarnation, God taking human flesh?

One biblical scholar gives us a clue when she tells us that our Gospel passage today is "a veritable patchwork quilt of phrases from the Old Testament." (Beverly Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching, Year C*, Westminster John Knox Press: 1994, p.8) And should we be surprised at that? We know that the Gospels often explain events or sayings in Jesus' life by quoting Old Testament prophecies and showing that they are being fulfilled. Aware that our Gospel is steeped in the Old Testament, Fr. John Shea notes that Jesus' reference in today's Gospel to "the roaring of the sea and the waves" and "shaking of the heavens" suggests that this apocalyptic picture that Jesus paints is a recapitulation of the Great Flood in the days of Noah, when all that God had created was being destroyed. And there is powerful support for this interpretation, for just a few chapters *earlier* in Luke's Gospel Jesus had said, "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man." (Luke 17:26) But didn't God make a *promise* to Noah? "What of the rainbow at the *end* of Noah's story?" asks John Shea. "What of the **pledge** [of the rainbow] that God would never again drown creation?" Fr. Shea finds the answer to his

own question in the next verses of our Gospel: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.”

“The *rainbow* **is** the Son of Man, the Full Human Being,” notes Fr. Shea. “[He] appears as things are falling apart, arriving from a space that **transcends** collapse. His advent banishes fear and allows his followers to stand up straight. The Son of Man *is* the new earth, the new place to stand. The waters cannot cover him. He is the redemption that is offered in the midst of a perishing world.”

Symbol upon symbol, as is so typical when we try to describe the meaning of deep spiritual truths beyond our comprehension. Our normal vocabulary will not suffice. So we use metaphors and similes: the Son of Man is God’s promised rainbow coming in a cloud; the Son of Man is the new earth, the new place to stand that the waters of destruction cannot submerge.

And I think that that last image is perhaps the most helpful in interpreting today’s Gospel: the Son of Man, the Full Human One (a translation preferred by several scholars) gives us a new place to stand, where the waters of destruction *cannot* reach. Chaos and destruction can happen all around us (and I don’t need to convince you that they **are** happening all around us), but we “stand before the Son of Man,” in the words of our Gospel, having “planted our feet on higher ground,” as the hymn says. And for me at least, this seems a far more faithful interpretation of what Jesus is saying in this apocalyptic passage. For Christians have all too often considered Jesus’ words in this and similar Gospel passages and gotten hung up on the question, “**When** is this going to happen?” And all sorts of problems arise along with that question.

First, asking “**When** is this going to happen?” assumes that Jesus is describing a *literal* end-of-the-world scenario; yet as we have seen, metaphor and symbol are often all that we have in describing spiritual truth, so a *literal* interpretation is often **not** the most faithful. Furthermore, throughout the Gospels Jesus is *never* focused on “when” the end of the world is coming. In fact in Matthew and Mark, Jesus says, “about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Mark 13:32, Matthew 24:36) If **Jesus** doesn’t know about the “when” and isn’t *concerned* about the “when”, why should **we** be? What Jesus is *far more* concerned about, I am convinced, is the “how”: **How** are we to live in response to the coming of the Son of Man, the Full Human One? The Full Human One comes to show us how to stand in a new place where the waters of destruction all around us cannot reach. The Full Human One comes to save us, to make us whole, to make *us* fully Human. The Second Century Saint Irenaeus said, “The Glory of God is the human person fully alive.” So when Jesus says in our Gospel that the Son of Man will come with great glory, perhaps he is envisioning a day when every person on earth is fully Human, fully alive, all that God created us to be. **This** is salvation; this is healing; this is wholeness (all of which are translations of the same Greek word).

St. Irenaeus *also* wrote, “[God] became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.” This is indeed the meaning of Jesus’ birth, the Incarnation: that God became human to both model and empower humanity to be one with God. Jesus’ prayer in John’s Gospel – that we be one with him and the Father (John 17) – is already answered in the Incarnation. We were created and redeemed to share, with Jesus the Full Human One, in the very being of God. We are meant to participate in the life of the Holy Trinity. This is our deepest identity.

Yet it is also true that we live in a broken world where “moths and rust consume” and good people turn away desperate refugees out of fear and suicide bombers and people with guns and rifles kill innocent people because they are black or Muslim or Christian or are associated with Planned Parenthood. And if your reaction to recent atrocities is anything like mine, then it can easily appear that we, too, are living in a time when, as Jesus says in our Gospel, there is “distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves” and people are trembling “from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world...” Some days I read the news and remember Jesus saying, “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man.” The world was falling apart in the days of Noah and it is falling apart in **our** day, as in every age. We are living **now** in the days of the Son of Man described in our Gospel, which means that there is great brokenness and destruction all around, *while at the same time* the Full Human One has given us a place to stand – is **Himself** the place to stand! – above the floods, on higher ground. The question for each of us is: with which will we most identify – the outer physical world that is falling apart all around us, or the inner spiritual world of our transcendent self?

The problem lies in the fact that more often than not, we identify with the outward world around us rather than with our transcendent center. We see the “distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves” and we “faint with fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.” We have failed to hear Jesus’ exhortation in our Gospel to “Be on guard so that [our] hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and... the worries of this life...”

“Surviving and engaging collapse depends on knowing where to stand, on finding higher ground,” writes Fr. Shea. “If we give ourselves over to the physical and social world that is collapsing, we will go down with it... We will not be aware of our transcendent self. We will have identified with those aspects of ourselves that are vulnerable to breakdown.

“Therefore, our task is prayer and vigilance. [We are being called to prayer and vigilance.] These disciplines heighten awareness of our **transcendent** nature, that dimension of ourselves that withstands destruction. Standing secure in this space, we know ourselves as companions of the Son of Man, the Full Human Being. With this new identity [and center], there emerges the courage not only to *survive* collapse but to **engage** it... Far from *shrinking from* destruction, we *lean into* it. We hold one another *through* and *beyond* the terrible collapses of life.” (ibid. p. 2) For that is what the Full Incarnate Human One does *for us*: holds us through and beyond our terrible, fearful collapses, that we might come to know that our true identity is not to be found on the level of those collapses, but on much firmer, higher ground. There we stand, out of reach of the floods, “before the Son of Man”, the Full Human One. And in his presence and on his ground we ourselves become fully human, fully alive – able to engage the crumbling world not from fear and trembling but with the same love and compassion that was born into this world in human flesh so long ago.

AMEN