

Rev. Julie U. Riley
1st Sunday of Advent
Luke 21:25-36
November 29, 2009

“It’s the most, wonderful time of the year!” I must confess I have been singing Christmas carols for 2 weeks already and today is only the first day of Advent. I love Christmas. Many of the old carols bring to mind happy memories of Christmases past: sitting on the organ bench with my great-grandmother, teaching her how to play “pong” on our first Atari, my own grandmother making sure everyone had a bell to ring as we sang jingle bells, and though even as a child we knew it was a little bit hoaxy, we all went along with it because we knew that without singing Christmas carols there would be no presents. I remember Brianna’s first Christmas, she was only 2 months old, and I held her during the Christmas Eve worship service. As we sang of the babe in Bethlehem, I looked down into her sweet little face and was overcome with awe, that my savior was once such a fragile child, whose mother Mary loved him as fiercely and tenderly as I loved my own child.

Today’s gospel reading does not bring any wonderful images of Christmas. It does not share any of Christmas’ warm fuzziness. There is no little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay, no poor shepherds in fields where they lay, no angels bending near the earth. Today’s gospel reading does not make a very good Christmas carol. It is confusing, and strange, and a little bit frightening, and that sweet baby Jesus is nowhere to be found.

Vincent van Gogh’s most famous painting, *The Starry Night*, captures the mood of this Advent text more accurately than any Christmas carol. Using his signature bold colors, van Gogh paints an apocalyptic sky like the one described by Jesus. Let me share with you one person’s description.

“There are swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep, dark blue and black. There is a bold and bright yellow moon and very bright stars...In the background is a small town, with the church steeple as its most prominent feature. In the foreground, a foreboding flame like image connects earth and sky. Art historians take it to be a cypress tree, which in van Gogh’s time would have been associated with graveyards and mourning. The famous painting elicits differing reactions from those who admire it. Some see it as a daunting image of a frightening sky, others as something bold and beautiful, and others as a glimpse of God.¹

Like the great painting, today’s gospel lesson elicits different reactions from those who hear it. For some it is frightening and bold, while for others it is a beautiful glimpse of God.

It strikes me that Jesus paints this Old Testament prophetic like image of the coming of the Son of God for the disciples in the last days of his earthly ministry. Despite the many times Jesus has tried to tell the disciple what is coming for him, and for them, they don't have a clue. Jesus knows that the disciples are about to face the greatest faith crises of their lives. Everything they have known about Jesus and about God's goodness is about to be challenged, and so Jesus paints this frightening and confusing and bold picture of chaos and turmoil and then he tells them that in the midst of all of that, God is coming. As sure as the spring follows winter and the sun rises in the east, God is coming. Even when the world around you comes crashing down, God is coming. Even when nothing in life makes sense, God is coming.

When I teach the confirmation class about what the Bible has to say to them I open the Bible to Genesis and read the first four words, "In the beginning God" and I turn to the book of Revelation and sum it up with four more word, "in the end God," and then I tell them that all that we encounter in between tells about God in the midst of the human life. Nothing in life or in death occurs outside the reign of God. This is God's promise to us.

As we look to the second coming and see frightening and confusing images, I am reminded that the images we find so comforting of the first advent were in fact very frightening and confusing for those who lived it: a young girl pregnant, delivering her child far from home in an animal stable, angels filling the nighttime sky with song. Who could believe that in these strange and confusing events, God was giving us the greatest gift of all? God's ways are not always our ways, and yet God's ways are always loving and faithful and good.

During the season of Advent as we remember the coming of Christ in the stable in Bethlehem and we look forward to the second coming of Christ in victory, may we always be on the lookout for the little advents along the way, those time when we are certain that Christ is with us. Let us remember that even in the midst of chaos and confusion, God is coming. Even when the world around you comes crashing down, God is coming. Even when nothing in life makes sense, God is coming. Be alert; pray that you may see Christ even when the world sees chaos. Be alert, remember God's promises, and do not let the event of this world dash your hopes or challenge your faith, for though you cannot see it, God is still at work. As we look for the coming of Christ, let us do so with courage and faith, trusting in the God who was and is and is to come. Thanks be to God.