

Sermon: Advent 4

The Rev. Mike Wernick

December 2, 2018

Year B

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalms 25:1-9

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

Did we do it... last week we ended the church year... celebrating you as Christ the King... King over all creation... that was the point... right... our work is done here... right... no... we need to start all over again... start the whole church year all over again... we don't have it all... quite... right... yet... oh... maybe this is more difficult than we thought...

And it is a difficult thing... trying not to be distracted... by sugar-plum fairies... and the symphony... by that house on the block that has the most lights and is going to win the neighborhood contest... by blockbuster movies released this season... by holiday sales... and cookie sales... and dinners... it's difficult trying not to be distracted... by the shopping and the wrapping and the giving... it's too difficult to see what's going on around us... and too painful too... parents and children being gassed at the Mexican border... the earthquake in Alaska... protests... injuries... and over 270 arrests in Paris over increases in fuel costs... 5M young people still living with HIV... and 500M guests hacked over the last four years through Marriott's servers... so we let ourselves be distracted...

Whether we think that Advent began three weeks ago... or go along with most church calendars... which say it begins today... this season is the beginning of a new church year... and as Pastor William Lamar... from the Metropolitan AME Church [in Washington, D.C.] wrote... year after year... church season after church season... we sit... we stand... we sing... we listen... we pray... we give... we confess... we are forgiven... we are fed at Table... we leave... we come back... rinse and repeat...

Some people want church to be the rock-solid place where nothing ever changes... because Lord knows there's enough change out there [point to the left]... but things in the sanctuary can begin to feel too predictable... or too stale... and we can stop listening... we can zone out... can say the prayers right along with the Presider... and not feel the forgiveness and grace... so we change up the liturgy... some churches get a praise band... a projection screen... or liturgical dancers... but Jewish Scripture professor Jack Levison said... that all we're really trying to do... *is break though the numbness*... but nothing in this liturgy can do that... only God can do it...

It's difficult trying not to be distracted by the beginning of today's Gospel... which says... *that there will be signs in the sun... the moon... and the stars... and distress on the earth among nations... even further confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves... people will faint from the fear and foreboding of what is coming... by the shaking of the powers of the heavens...* but Luke's Gospel is about nothing other than the history... mystery... and majesty of the Christ...

John Shea writes that while some of us take this cosmic symbolism as political anarchy and a breakdown of the social order... some understand it as a breakdown in the worlds of meaning we have constructed... or as our individual deaths... or as the end of space / time...

At one point in my life... I felt annoyed... just plain annoyed... that things broke... or wore out... or wore down... in my world... if I took care of things... they'd last almost forever... but you know... simply washing and drying clothes... even if you never wear them... wears them out... tension in our relationships can wear us out... believing what's not true... or rejecting what is... or not even being sure... can wear us out... undiagnosed dis-ease can take its toll... the hundred kinds of little deaths we face each day can wear us out and break us down... so it's not God saying that... *creation is good*... and us asking... *so why is it breaking down*... it's God saying that *creation is good but it does also break down... what doesn't break down is my love for you*... there

is entropy... that's part of the created order... and entropy affects us all... it's part of what clears the way for new life... and different kinds of life... and human creativity... for HIV and cancer treatments now... not to be perfect... but to be better than they were thirty years ago... for marriage equality in the courthouse and in the church to be better than civil unions... for gender-neutral translations of the Psalms to be better than those which imply that God is a boy's name... out with the old and in with the new...

But breaking through the numbness... is a difficult thing... because we have to change... and not breaking through the numbness... is a difficult thing... because we can begin to lose hope... and it's a difficult thing... trying not to be distracted from the fear that could come... that may come... from Jesus' words in Luke... because they seem to be hopeless... but when we look past the surface value... we see God's love... which brings life from death... and at the beginning of this new year... when we want to focus on God's new life in the manger... we can be so distracted... by the unexpected... that we cannot see God's unchanging Love standing right in front of us...

When my daughter was born... we had no idea what would be expected of us... we had no idea how much our lives would change... we had no idea how much things would turn around... we had been used to going to the movies... but that was when we bought our first VCR... so we could stay home to watch them... we had been used to doing what we wanted... when we wanted... but that changed into doing what she needed... when she needed it... we had been used to spending our money the way we wanted... but that changed into spending it for what she wanted... but we had no idea how much our hearts could overflow with love... had no idea how much we'd be willing to sacrifice for her... no idea how willing we might be to sacrifice our lives... for her...

Jesus said... you'll know that summer is near... when the fig trees sprout leaves... you'll know that God's kingdom is near... when you see these things taking place... but seeing the leaves and NOT knowing that summer is near... seeing the signs and NOT knowing that God's kingdom is near... is getting stuck on the surface value of things...

it's to see in a mirror dimly... so we must look past the surface... like one of those Magic Eye images... focus our attention past the surface value... to see the signs... we must look deeper to see them... and then we will also see God's reversals... and Luke's Gospel includes them... in the Magnificat... Mary speaks about the strength of God's arm... in the Song of Zechariah John's father... affirms that God has redeemed God's people... in the Song of Simeon... Simeon sees God's salvation... and in the Sermon on the Plain... Jesus affirms God's justice... because God's justice and love arrive from a place... that transcends collapse...

The truth is... we can see the signs going on in our lives... and in the church... and in the world... not as threats or losses... but as reversals that bring God's justice... as rehearsals for the incoming reign of God... we can be on guard... that is awake... and aware... and mindful... without having heavy hearts... the truth is... God redeems us where we are... in each moment... but God isn't finished with us yet... so let's wait in confidence... this Advent... for the fullness of God's coming in Christ...

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