

Advent IC
Luke 21:25-26
November 29, 2009

This time of year we are inundated with Christmas stories, Christmas movies, Christmas TV specials. It seems like you can't turn on the television or go to the multiplex without being bombarded with stories about Scrooge or Santa, elves or reindeer, magical snowmen or ghosts of Christmases past. I personally have been scarred for life by a commercial for a Disney DVD called "Santa Buddies." This is a live-action film, where a raft of sickeningly sweet golden retriever puppies with computer animated mouths head off to the North Pole to save Christmas in their sickeningly sweet, puppy-like way. The horror. The horror.

I am pleased to observe, however, that this year is different. This year, it seems, Hollywood has discovered the season of Advent. How else can you explain the raft of films coming into theaters that re-create, in big-screen intensity, the very events described in our gospel lesson today? The movie "2012," which illustrates the end of the world in computer-generated detail, with seas erupting, mountains crumbling, cities falling, and a plucky John Cusak dodging it all, racing to reunite his family and save them from destruction.

Or the new film "The Road," based on the Cormac McCarthy novel, featuring Viggo Mortenson making his way through a shattered landscape after the end of the world. Or "The Book of Eli," coming in January, with Denzel Washington ALSO making his way through a shattered landscape after the end of the world.

These are movies to get you into the spirit of the Advent season all right. These are movies that put visual flesh on the bones of Biblical apocalyptic warnings. These are movies that remind us that it could ... or as Jesus warns in the lesson ... that it WILL all fall apart one day.

Advent is a funny season. In the world out there, we are supposed to be decorating our homes and shopping our brains out and thinking about a holly jolly Christmas, parties, mistletoe and cookies. In here, in church, we come looking for the real Christmas story, looking for Baby Jesus, trying to prepare our hearts to receive the mystery of the Incarnation once again, waiting with bated breath for the coming of Immanuel, God-with-us.

And yet, there is no Baby Jesus here. There is no angel, no virgin, no bewildered fiancé, no census decree from Augustus Caesar to get them on a donkey and headed down the road to Bethlehem. We enter Advent, the beginning of our church year, our Christian New Year, at the end of the story, the whole story of creation and humanity. We come in on the last page, when it all falls apart for good ... sun, moon and stars, earth, winds and waters, and every living thing ... done, over, finished. It is a harsh, unsentimental beginning to a season that strives to be soft and fuzzy and very, very sentimental.

Advent is a funny season. We want it to work a certain way. We want it to turn our gaze gently and lovingly toward a manger bed in the town of Bethlehem 2,000 long years ago. And yet, Advent, this time of waiting and preparation, refuses to go down that road, at least not until the very end, when Christmas is hard upon us. Advent turns our gaze in another direction entirely.

“Every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end,” sang the rock band Semisonic about a decade ago. That’s how our gaze is being directed, this first Sunday of Advent. Every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end. And what today’s gospel lesson offers us, the vision Jesus holds up before the crowds in the Temple way back then, 2,000 years ago, and what he lifts up before us this morning, is the vision of the new beginning that is coming, hard on the heels of that rough, violent, and dangerous ending.

“They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud,” Jesus tells them. He’s quoting from Daniel here, the Old Testament prophet. The ending comes with a beginning built in. Whether you read it metaphorically or allegorically ... and I encourage you to do that. This kind of writing is all Biblical allegory.

So whether you read it metaphorically or allegorically, the truth under the metaphor, the truth inside the allegory is that Jesus lives. Jesus lives, and the work that he began 2,000 years ago continues, and that he will deliver us from every kind of apocalyptic upheaval, great and small, transient and final.

We live in the time between the times. That's what Advent teaches us. The time between the earthly work of Jesus and the time of the fulfillment of that work. But Advent teaches us never, never, never to forget that his work will be fulfilled. And that his work is already being fulfilled, in ways small and large, in the midst of earthquakes, famines, floods, when it feels that the world is rocking under our feet and that everything is about to implode.

When these things begin to take place, Jesus says, "STAND UP." Jesus says, "Raise your heads." In the midst of cataclysmic despair, that is the time to look up, to look forward, and to see that redemption coming near.

You know, we don't need the movies to remind us that things could fall apart at any moment. We know that. We have seen it. Apocalypse comes creeping, like the slowly vanishing ice pack in the Arctic Sea, raising sea levels and pushing polar bears to the edge. Apocalypse comes roaring, like Hurricane Katrina, laying unimaginable waste to lives and communities, businesses and farms, along the Gulf Coast. Apocalypse comes at human hands ... towers fall in New York City, a family is gunned down in an expensive Florida home on Thanksgiving Day. Apocalypse comes in all the random unpredictability of human life.

We know that. Somewhere in the core, we know that we are fragile, mortal, breakable beings living in a dangerous world. We know that if apocalypse hasn't touched us yet, it could come tomorrow. Soren Kierkegaard once defined the word "anxiety" as "the next day." And the gospel acknowledges in clear-headed fashion that with that anxiety comes the deep desire to duck, to run and hide. To eat, to drink, to distract ourselves with everything or anything ... television, computers, iPods, or iPhones ... anything to muffle that anxiety, that fear of the apocalypse that just might come tomorrow.

But Advent tells us NOT to duck. Advent says, “heads up!”

There are some here this morning who got up in the midst of their own personal apocalypses. They got up, got dressed, and came to church. There are some here whose worlds are shaking beneath their feet. Jobs lost or on the line. Relationships rocky, stumbling, crumbling. Finances run amuck, children run amuck, a cancer run amuck. They too got up, got dressed, and came to church. Regardless of whatever is rocking their world today, they stood up. They raised their heads. And they came to hear once more the good news of Advent. That every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end. That our redemption is at hand.

Advent doesn't work the way we'd like it too. It doesn't swaddle us or coddle us or make us feel all soft and warm inside, the way a Disneyfied golden retriever puppy is supposed to do. Instead, this season wakes us up when we would rather sleep it off. It stands us upright when we would rather cower in fear. It fills our hearts with confidence and hope and expectation when all the evidence is pointing the other way.

Because every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end. And that's what Advent tells us, this first day of another new year.

Stand up. Raise your head. Look. See. God has not forgotten you. There is a light at the end of the tunnel and it is not a train. It's the light of the world. It shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. It's the light of the world and it's coming soon.