

Don't Worry, Stand Up!

- Luke 21:25-36; Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25
- November 29, 2009
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What it would be like to live in a perfect world?

In a Perfect World a person should feel as good at 50 as he did at 17, and she would actually be as smart at 50 as she thought she was at 17.

In a Perfect World pro baseball players would complain about teachers being paid contracts worth millions of dollars.

In a Perfect World the mail would always be early, the check would always be in the mail, and it would be written for more than you expected.

In a Perfect World potato chips might have calories, but if you ate them with dip, the calories would be neutralized.

In a Perfect World every once in a while at least, a kid who always closed the door softly would be told, "Go back and slam the door."

But, the world is not perfect. We never seem to be as smart or as wise as we need to be, no matter our ages.

Life is not so much following a plan as handling the unexpected interruptions.

Society's values always seem to be out of synch with our consciences.

Institutions that promise to serve us regularly violate our trust.

The things that comfort us - food, sex, entertainment - are fattening, dangerous, or very expensive.

Constructive creativity, which we all know is the secret to higher quality of life, is covered over by enforced conformity.

In this world, this not-so-perfect world, disappointments seem to control. Our loved ones get sick. Our friends die too soon. People we trust betray us. Folks who are models of faith to us get frustrated and angry with each other. Stress rests in our beings where we know joy should be. War is on our minds when we pray for the coming of the Prince of Peace. We start to believe that violence can bring peace, that sending more troops to Afghanistan will bring all troops home sooner.

The texts for the First Sunday in Advent are always dark and foreboding. My colleague, Scott Barton, will be saying these words to his congregation near Philadelphia today:

"... the Advent texts are often unwelcome news for the preacher, at least, including this one, and maybe most congregations, too. They're often about some disaster, a kind of ramped-up version of a global warming scenario, the sun and moon and stars doing strange things, the roaring of the seas, fear and fainting and foreboding. Sometimes they seem tailor-made for us, written by visionaries who somehow knew what life these days would be about, what with the prospect of nuclear mushroom clouds off in the distance or rising seas that might swamp cities or suicide bombers in an everyday open market or a society with a taste of plenty but full of anxiety that there isn't going to be enough, for me, or my family, or my country. But we've come to church for a little bit of comfort. We read about disaster in the papers every day, and see it round-the-clock on CNN. It's on the lips of everyone from Bill O'Reilly to Al Gore. And sometimes, these come right out of the mouth of Jesus. What are we to make of it, coming from the one whom we're getting ready to celebrate the birth of in a pastoral scene, as he's wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger?"

The Gospel is Good News, even in dark times. In Luke's account of Jesus, the disciples are displaying exactly the feelings we all get when we realize that this is not a perfect world - anxiety, fear, worry. These are very powerful feelings. It is because of the power of the feelings that Jesus first paints a picture of dark danger, and then he invites the disciples to pray for strength. Rather than to "duck and cover," they are to stand up! Let God's Spirit control your mind and body, Jesus seems to be saying.

In his book *When God Whispers Your Name*, Max Lucado says that "the German word for worry means 'to strangle.' The Greek word for worry means 'to divide the mind.' Both are accurate. Worry is a noose on the neck and a distraction to the mind." (HomilieticsOnline, 112909)

The first Sunday in Advent asks us to confront that which is dark and threatening. The four words we associate with Advent: Hope, peace, joy, and love, have meaning only if they have power. We begin with hope, because hope is the key that opens the other three realities of peace, joy, and love. We live in a dark world, a threatening world. Luke paints a picture of fearsome threat as the background for Jesus as teacher of the disciples. Yes, Jesus seems to say, there are powers that threaten to undo you and to overcome you. But, I have come, he seems to claim, to give you the power of God, the power of light that no darkness can overcome. Put away your worry; stand up with your head high!

Reproduced in your bulletin is Vincent van Gogh's masterpiece *The Starry Night*. I offer it as an illustration of the work we are asked to do today as we begin our Advent journey. I am indebted to Wesley Avram, pastor of the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in Bryn Mawr, PA, for this inspiration. ([Feasting On the Word](#), Year C, Vol. 1, p. 21f)

- Notice the bold colors. Van Gogh was famous for his dramatic use of color.
- Van Gogh was the son of a Dutch pastor. History tells us that he was drawn to the poor, and was something of an evangelist among the poor.
- Van Gogh likely knew the New Testament very well, and would be familiar with our text for today from Luke 21.
- The stars are dominant. One critic called the stars “rockets of burning yellow.” Is it a threatening or a hopeful sky?
- There are swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep, dark blue and black. Are they threatening or receding?
- You can see that there is a small town depicted under the sky. The most dominant structure is a church steeple.
- In the foreground, a foreboding flamelike 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.
- We know that van Gogh was a troubled and gifted man. Is the cypress reaching up to block out the light, or is the light becoming brighter, reducing the fear that we associate with death?

Like van Gogh’s great painting, Luke’s description of ultimate threats to the world elicits different reactions from those who read and hear it. Frightening, bold, and beautiful glimpses of God - this is what Jesus asks us to encounter on this First Sunday in Advent. As difficult as it is to hear, as troubled as the text may make listeners feel, in it are treasures that help focus us on the true meaning and purpose of Advent.

Jesus intends that hope and expectation grow to be stronger than our worry and anxiety. Hope and expectation grow when we face our fears squarely. Famine, drought, war, disease, from AIDS to H1N1, still plague our world. People we know and love struggle with greed, addiction, mental illness, and misplaced priorities. Everyone I know needs to recover from something!

Christ calls us, as believers, to be alert and to be constantly praying for God’s kingdom to ‘break through’ into our world. We need Christ himself to come. We will say it each time we light an Advent candle in worship this year: “Come down, O Lord, tear open the heavens and come down!”

We are called to ‘stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption is drawing near.’

We already know the surprise. When the heavens are torn open, and Jesus comes, he will arrive as the most helpless of creatures - as a little baby. And every instinct in our souls will move us to care for the baby. And as the baby grows, so will we. So will the Kingdom grow.

It is not a perfect world. Far from it, it is a dangerous world. Those of us who have come to hear from Jesus today have a choice. We can be afraid of all the terrible

things that can yet happen to us and to the world we try to love. Or, we can stand up and be counted as those who have hope in their souls and expectation in their hearts. We can stand up and greet a future that, even now, God is designing for us.

Let us choose to stand up! Our redemption is drawing near. The power of our faith - perhaps even the quality of our very lives - depends upon the seed of hope that is planted in our souls today.

Amen.