

## **When the Unthinkable Happens** Reading: Luke 21:25-36 Advent 1/C

By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atascadero CA 12/01/24

Jesus warned his disciples: "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." (Luke 21:25)

Well, welcome to Advent 1! Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the liturgical season preceding the celebration of Christmas. Today is also the first Sunday in December when most of the country is already decking the halls with boughs of holly while neighborhoods light up their houses with bright, colorful lights. People are decorating their Christmas trees at home and others are sending Christmas-holiday cards to loved ones near and far. Black Friday has already come and gone while stores are piping holiday music through their sound system to encourage people to keep shopping. Yet today in our biblical readings, there is no mention of jolly ole St. Nick, no baby in the manger, no wise men on their way to Bethlehem, no mention of "joy to the world." Instead, we hear apocalyptic predictions, revealing images of what is to come, of an era about to go into the ash heap. Why all the gloom?

The season of Advent demands a very different kind of preparation for the coming of the Prince of Peace. The preparation for peace, love, and joy to enter into our hearts and our society requires a deeper level of awareness than the shopping malls and glitzy catalogs suggest. In today's gospel, Jesus delivers a powerful discourse about the end times and his second coming. He warns of the signs and tribulations that will precede these momentous events. In summary, today's biblical insights remind us that all is not well in the world in our time; that major changes must happen if God's dream is to take hold. A shakeup must occur because the Powers of the world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God continue to resist God's dream for humanity.

These destructive powers can be found in our economic, political, industrial, and medical institutions whose inner-spirituality has fallen. This means that greed and power have dominated their policies rather than good will towards the citizens of our country. These spiritually-bankrupt institutions have an embedded way of thinking and acting where power is hoarded, money is loved, nationalism is honored, horrendous lies are backed by big money, the poor are oppressed, minorities are marginalized, and the cycle of violence is perpetrated. And yet, many of our recently elected officials approve of these kinds of policies and ways of thinking. How do we hold onto hope in these dark times? How should a Christian react when the unthinkable happens? Let's take a closer look at Luke's gospel which points to a time when the unthinkable did happen.

The context of this chapter in the gospel of Luke takes place near the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus speaks publicly and predicts that the time is coming when Herod's Temple, the central worship place of the Jews, will be utterly destroyed. Along with the destruction of the Temple, Jesus also warns that "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven." (Luke 21:10,11) Some forty years later, those predictions came true. It was the 'end of a times' for the Jewish population living in Jerusalem. In 70 AD, Rome ultimately crushed a rebellion that was fomenting in Jerusalem. Its army destroyed the temple, burned the city to the ground, killed the rebels, and enslaved its inhabitants. So many innocent people died. This destruction was so complete that today there is difficulty pinpointing the exact location of that magnificent Temple that once dominated the city.

So, how do we Christians respond when the unthinkable happens to us, to our loved ones, to our country, to our world? How should we react when our striving for justice, peace, compassion, and the dignity of every human being is being thwarted by elected officials in power? I don't know about you, but my heart is broken. I sometimes feel betrayed by fellow Christians who have lost their moral compass. It feels as if our democracy is dying in darkness, where lies have become the norm, where sexual predators and unqualified staff are being appointed to key positions in our nation, where billionaires are controlling the election. The lost, the lonely, and the left-behind for whom Jesus advocated and healed are being placed at great risk.

I know some people who are even thinking about leaving our country. There are others who have decided not to read the paper or listen to the news, giving up on politics altogether and relying on music or poetry or the beauty of nature to blot out what is occurring. Honestly, I can't blame them. Perhaps these are the ones Jesus spoke about who will "faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world." (Luke 21:26)

So given the political and spiritual situation of what our nation is facing today, how does one faithfully react to the unthinkable in these times of darkness? Here are a few of my reflections based on today's gospel:

1. **Hold onto hope:** Hope is having the confidence that no matter how bad things are today, the future is open to new possibilities that are not evident in the present. Hope is different from optimism, which sees something positive in all situations (e.g. cheer up, look at the bright side). But Christian hope is based on the belief that the Spirit of God is actively working through creation. And because of this powerful presence, all things become possible, even a new heaven and earth. Jesus said: "When these things begin to take place, [e.g. when chaos raises its ugly head, when you are attacked or persecuted, when climate change affects the oceans and the roaring of the seas] stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near!" (Luke 21:28) Remember, a storm eventually runs out of rain!
2. **Connect with people** who "share your values, those who want a decent society, who reject bigotry, who treat people equally and respectfully, who seek social justice, and who keep in mind the common good. All of us need the support and reassurance that come with connection to these kindred souls." (Reich) Jesus said: "Do not let your hearts be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." (Luke 21:34) Those who belong to an authentic community of faith are the fortunate ones. They do not have to carry this pain alone and neither do we.
3. **Act decisively** in promoting the kingdom of God in whatever way is possible, each according to your gifts. For myself, I often write to my elected officials and send money to those organizations and leaders that promote civil rights and fight for justice. I try to preach prophetically, speaking truth to a culture of lies. But there is more I can do such as boycotting those products produced by companies that discriminate. And since we are up against forces that use bigotry and lies to entrench their power, it will take time, patience, and tenacity to change course. So "do not let your hearts be weighted down" in the interim. Remember that "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1)
4. **Look upward.** Prayer is responding to God, with or without words. Praying for 'change' is known as intercessory prayer. Intercessors are people who are not satisfied with the way things are now in our chaotic world. Instead, they visualize an alternative future into being through prayer and action, thus helping create a different reality than what is. Through prayer, they create a larger opening, an invitation where the Holy Spirit of God can enter in, doing more than any of us can ever hope or imagine on our ego strength alone. Nothing in this world is fixed! History will belong to the intercessors who believe the future into being. In today's opening collect, we prayed: "Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." Keep praying for the grace to stand up to those powers of the world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

To my friends who are despairing, I have shared Howard Zinn's reflection about hope. He says: "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places-and there are so many-where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

So on this first Sunday of Advent, I want to close with a poem written by John Mark Green about when the Unthinkable Happens: "How do we go on after the unthinkable happens? How can we carry the burden of knowing the world can be cruel and dangerous, the future so unpredictable? How do we grieve with empty arms and a head filled with echoing memories? We are stronger than we know, and this is how we show it: Holding each other, giving comfort in the midst of pain. Loving more fiercely, through our actions and the things we say. Making the world just a little bit better, every single day. Never taking life for granted, knowing that it can be snatched away. This world may bring deep darkness, but we are the bearers of light. We'll join our flames together, and shine in the blackest of nights." *Amen*