

“Stand Up and Raise Your Heads”

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Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-33

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The world can be a scary place. Every day we read and hear about tragedies, conflicts, natural disasters... It can be hard to think about the future without trembling a little. It can make you wonder just how it's possible to have a sense of hope and expectation, let alone comfort and joy, when we're faced with so many insurmountable difficulties. In a Bible study a couple of weeks ago, I was reminded of the W. B. Yeats poem "The Second Coming." Yeats begins with that sense of dread:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”

That may have been how it felt to Jeremiah's audience. It must have seemed as though the center of their lives was giving way. Everything falling apart around them. Jeremiah lived very close to Israel's end. He lived in a time when all the assumptions about who they were as a people and what their relationship to God meant for them were being called into question. The enemy was at their gates and soon, within Jeremiah's lifetime, all their fears would be fulfilled.

He'd been warning them about this for a long time. Jeremiah had looked to the horizon, he had read the signs, and he knew they would never withstand the coming storm. But they dismissed his warnings; they treated him like dirt. No one wanted to hear his words of doom.

We understand that, of course. No one likes bad news. No one wants to be told their efforts are a waste of time, that no matter what they do they cannot avoid disaster. It makes me wonder what the conversation has been like around President Obama as he has wrestled over what to do next in Afghanistan. There are no good choices, no certain path that will lead to success. Decisions about the economy seem to be the same. Everything that's been done already, between bailouts and stimulus programs and we're still looking at some of the highest unemployment rates in a generation. "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold." It feels like the end of something is arriving, doesn't it?

Yet Jeremiah, surrounded by a crumbling society, takes a strange turn in his poetry. In the middle of all his words of warning he suddenly offers hope. He holds out the promise of restoration. "The days are surely coming... In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety." There's another side to this coin of invasion and exile. "Wait for it," he tells them, "God isn't finished with Israel yet."

That's the word Jesus gives his listeners, all of them getting ready to duck and cover as they imagine the powers of the heavens shaken. And who wouldn't want to hide? Who hasn't felt like turning off the radio and the TV, cancelling newspaper subscriptions and stocking up on canned goods and water? It seems like the wise thing to do to run away from it all, just lie low until the dust settles. But what seems like the end of everything, Jesus sees as the beginning: "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." It's as if a top is circling to a stop and God takes hold of it to give it another spin.

Jesus is pointing them to the promise of a final return, what many call a "second coming." Interesting, though, how that term is strangely missing from the New Testament. It could be because the "first coming" isn't quite finished. There is no break between Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, and the fulfillment of God's kingdom among us. For us the kingdom is already here, but not yet fully here. All the fear-inducing events around us serve as reminders of that. And if you look closely at the list of events Jesus names, you'll see that none of them is specific: distress among nations, confusion, fear and foreboding; there's nothing definite to point to. All of it is as true today as it was then.

And the remedy for us now, as it was then, is to stand up and raise our heads for the kingdom of God is near. Rather than wringing our hands in despair over the condition of the world, we're called to point the world to God's kingdom. We do that by loving our enemies even when they threaten to kill us. We do it by feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and rejected, reaching to the stranger and refugee to give them a home. It may seem as though everything is falling apart, but it's precisely in those circumstances that God chooses to reveal the kingdom, so long as we have courage enough to raise our heads and point to it.

That may seem like an odd way to begin the season of Advent. But Jesus' birth occurs in a real world of pain and violence and fear. And over and over his birth reminds us God is not finished with us yet. Wait for it...the days are surely coming...stand up and raise your heads, the kingdom of God is near.

Amen