

Advent 1 2018

In 1947 a group of nuclear scientists at the University of Chicago created something they called the Doomsday Clock. In the wake of the use of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, these scientists felt the world had entered a new era in which one could reliably deduce that the world itself was at risk of being destroyed. They took the face of a clock and put hands on it representing the time "11:53 PM"; seven minutes to midnight, symbolic of the dangerous nearness of catastrophic global destruction.

In the years since the creation of the clock, the time has been moved back and forth, according to, not only the level of nuclear threat, but also according to threats to the environment, such as global warming. In 1984, in the midst of the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, the time moved all the way to 11:57: three minutes to midnight. In 1991, when those same two superpowers signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, the time was turned all the way back to 11:43. As of today, it is 11:55, five minutes to midnight. The nuclear scientists at the University of Chicago want us to know that, as they read the signs, the end is near.

This kind of disconnect is going on in our passage from Luke this morning. Jesus is talking about big signs, scary signs...signs in the sun, moon and stars, perhaps once-in-a-lifetime signs. At the same time he is talking about quiet signs, signs that are easily observed, if our eyes are open to them, in the most ordinary events taking place around us. When we are talking about end times, ultimate things, we need to be careful how we perceive and interpret each of these.

It is a new church year now, and so we say goodbye to the Gospel of Mark and hello to the Gospel of Luke. I love how the gospels tell the same essential story, but with the differences that come from the personalities of the authors, and the concerns of the early church communities they served. Mark's gospel begins when Jesus is a man, and John the Baptist announces the coming kingdom of God. Luke's gospel begins with the conception of John the Baptist.

We are not introduced to the gospel of Luke from the beginning just yet. Every year the lectionary does this strange thing of starting at the beginning of the year by focussing on the end. We begin our church year and our observance of Advent, by focusing on end times.

It is the last week of Jesus' life. He has made his way into Jerusalem surrounded by adoring crowds of followers. He has taken up a spot in the Temple and he has been teaching there. At one point he overhears a conversation about the beauty of the Temple, its ornate stonework and lovely appointments. He remarks,

"As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down"

This is a completely shocking statement... like someone saying, "The day will come when the beautiful church you love, the place where you go to find the presence of God, will just be a pile of rubble." After Jesus' listeners get their bearings, someone manages to ask Jesus a question. "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" [21:7]

At the beginning of today's gospel, Jesus moves on to talk about other kinds of signs and these are the kinds of things that are truly out of our sphere of influence. We cannot hope to stop the stars moving in their courses. We cannot relight the sun if it should go out. We cannot stop the cycles of the moon any more than the ancients could.

lift up your heads. This is when you can expect good things to begin happening again. In the face of what is scary, Jesus offers words of comfort. That is what this passage is about. It is a passage meant to comfort those who hear it and are anxious.

We are going through change in this parish. We are in the middle of the process of breaking up the united Benefice and you will see the legal process in hand as you read the notice posted at the north door. We are being challenged in this church in the same way that the disciples and Jesus' other followers were challenged in that, like them, we don't know what is going to happen. I am confident that by God's good grace we will like the early church go from strength to strength, but along the way we will have our moments. I love the image of the fig tree.

Perhaps we need to lift our heads so that we can see what's going on with the fig tree. For people in ancient Palestine the fig tree would be a very familiar sight, and one that would resonate with them emotionally. The fig tree with its succulent fruit is a symbol for well-being, of plenty. The prophet Isaiah said;

“Do not listen to Hezekiah; for thus says the king of Assyria: ‘Make your peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree and drink water from your own cistern.’”

The image is of each son or daughter of Israel eating from their own vine and sitting peacefully under a fig tree, contented and unafraid. Jesus points out to his listeners the signs given by the fig tree... how it sprouts leaves, which can be taken as a sure sign of a very welcome change, thoughts of the summer, the harvest, the delicious fruit that is promised.

This Advent, the beginning of the Church year is a time for us to think about growth and facing up to the future. During Lent we shall be holding discussion groups that will concentrate on where we are going as a Church. Before that we will be preparing the ground by thinking and praying about our situation and how we move forward. Our situation is unique so that will require some lateral thinking. After Lent we will move into the spring when we will have our away day to formulate our plans for the future. We will not be fearful about the future- we will be brave and courageous.

As an Advent psalm tells us, with a message of hope reminds us;

“Lift up your heads, O you gates; and be you lifted up, you everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O you gates; even lift them up, you everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.”

Unlike the University of Chicago Doomsday clock, ours will be a long way back from 11.53pm!

Amen.