

A God's Eye View
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Text: Luke 21:25-36

Though my refrigerator is still full of uneaten turkey and congealed cranberry sauce, the world around us has moved on. We are being inundated by the hurrying and the worrying and the perky muzak of Christmas. And along with it, my holiday anxiety is beginning to rise like a tidal wave—which is why I find the alternative world of the church so oddly and wonderfully comforting. Yes, with our somber Advent hymns and deep purple, with our apocalyptic scriptures and melancholy liturgies, the church, on this late November morning, is strangely out of sync with the secular world. And in that incongruity, we are reminded of who we are. On this first day of the Christian year, we are reminded that as disciples of Jesus Christ we are not to be conformed to this world; instead, we are to be transformed by the hurt and the hope and the healing of the Christian faith.

But before the good news comes the bad news. Things are not the way that God intends for them to be. And the sooner we admit this, the sooner we can move into the fullness of God's promise. These verses from Luke's apocalypse come just before the passion story of Jesus—a strange place for us to begin our preparations for Christmas. And we hear Jesus predicting terrible times: destruction, war, political catastrophe, suffering, persecution, natural disaster—all of which will be followed by change, transformation, re-creation. Yes, our text for today is brutally honest, showing us both the bad news and the good news of the Christian faith, offering to us a God's eye view of the way things really are.

Let me make Luke's dramatic language live in the here and now by telling you what we saw these last three weeks in Ethiopia—certainly one of the most beautiful and most bruised places on the face of this fragile earth. Some of you are old enough to remember when the brutality of Emperor Haile Selassie was finally overthrown through a revolution of the Ethiopian people. But because of the shortsighted policies of our own government, the people turned toward Russia, and Selassie's tyranny was soon replaced by the Derg, a communist-based government. Though they began important social reforms, they also brought religious oppression. Our partner church, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus was one of the oppressed groups, with many pastors and lay leaders tortured and imprisoned and mysteriously killed. In the 1990s, the current government was put in place, and though they still are ignoring the rights and needs of some tribal and ethnic groups, there is no longer overt persecution or repression of religious groups.

My husband Sim and I were privileged to visit west and southwestern Ethiopia, flying in a nine-seater, one-engine plane, marveling at the exquisite patchwork quilt of green and yellow fields, uncluttered by power lines or highways or strip mall ugliness. But embedded in that beauty is unbelievable poverty and illness and illiteracy—hard to imagine in today's world. Add to this the

scourge of HIV/AIDS, which is sapping life from millions of African families, mainly because of heterosexual infidelity and polygamy. And then there is the influx of guns from Russia and the United States, remnants of the civil wars still raging in many African countries—guns so cheap and accessible that one chicken will buy you a fully loaded automatic rifle.

Yes today, Luke's text—first written to people being persecuted in first-century Christianity—talks about distress among the nations. It describes a confusion caused by the roaring of political and social waves inundating an unprepared people—a time when men and women will faint from foreboding and fear. And though this language may seem hyperbolic to us, here, in our relative comfort and complacency, such language is electric for the emerging peoples of Africa. It is electric for the one in seven people in this world—a growing number—who are hungry and malnourished according to a new study released just this week. It is electric to the war torn people of the Middle East. It is electric to the millions of Americans in rural and urban areas who are poorer today than they were five years ago. Though the abundant life promised through the resurrected power of Jesus Christ is a God-promised reality, in our world today we have yet to make such abundant life available to all God's children. And so, on this first Sunday of Advent, we look toward the future—not toward the past when Jesus was born as a baby, but toward the future when Jesus will be fully born again through the social, political, and spiritual wholeness of all God's people everywhere.

What Luke imagines Jesus saying to the peoples of Africa and to the peoples of Anacostia—and to us—is this: bad things happen. In fact, bad things happen to good people. In an unfinished world, a world of sin, a world of free will and selfish living and power politics, bad things happen to good people. Poverty happens. HIV/AIDS happens. Corruption and terrorism happen. Wars and famine happen. Towers fall and babies die and cancer kills. BUT bad things are never the final world BECAUSE God's impulse, God's dream, and God's unwavering promise is always life.

In Ethiopia, it is the church that is trying to be God's impulse, to be God's dream, to be God's unwavering promise of life. In Dembidollo, our Presbyterian money is funding a school literally stuffed to overflowing with disciplined students, learning with a hunger and a hope that is palpable. The Mekane Yesus church has grown from 20,000 members to over four million members in under forty years. People show up for worship forty-five minutes early in order to get a seat—oftentimes climbing through windows—and they sing and pray and learn every Sunday morning with intense joy, an average service lasting for over two and a half hours. And their worship overflows into mission. Your mission dollars are helping an Ethiopian trained development worker to create potable water projects, to teach people how to dig simple wells, to create hybrid cattle that thrive in the particularity of the high Ethiopian climate. He is encouraging vegetable gardens that improve nutrition and solar power panels that ease the difficult work of Ethiopian women.

And then there is Tulegit, a remote eight-year-old mission post, where John and Gwen Haspel are reaching a previously unreached population—the Suri people. There is no electricity, no running water, and it takes eighteen hours, once a month, to drive supplies into this remote

paradise in the tropics. But life there is rich and full. The women are beautiful in an amazing way: bare-breasted, adorned with huge lip rings, and earrings puncturing and stretching their skin. But in Tulegit there is also a medical clinic that has in stock the only snake bite serum in all of Western Ethiopia. The government school is built on church property, and your mission dollars pay for hundreds of students to travel from villages out in the bush, to live in this community, where the first-grade classroom has sixty students ranging in age from four to nineteen. These students are eager to read and grow and live into the 21st-century world.

I had the privilege to preach at morning prayers in this remote part of God's world, my words first being translated from English into the Amarek language, and then re-translated into the Suri language. There they sat, dozens of passionate people, babies dangling on their knees, listening intently to grasp the message of the Scripture—a hunger for the gospel that is every preacher's dream, people eager to hear good news that gives them a God's eye view of the world, a world bigger and more hopeful than the demon-possessed world of their more traditional tribal religions.

Yes indeed, Africa is emerging out of the darkness of colonial repression, with democratic liberation now having come to all the nations of the continent within the last fifty years. But Africa is still unfolding, and in its political adolescence it is experiencing chaos, corruption, creative tension, and restless rebellion against western ways of doing things. Africa is an exciting, scary, potential-filled cauldron of possibility. And the Christian church is right in the middle of it all—messing it up in some ways, but also offering a message of hope and abundance and reconciliation that can make all the difference in the years to come.

Nobody more represents this hope than Nelson Mandela, the now eighty-five-year-old icon of freedom for all of Africa. One of the high points of our African trip for Sim and me was visiting Robben Island and seeing the cold, stark, isolation that imprisoned Mandela for almost thirty years. Seeing that den of deprivation only deepened my respect for this man. Mandella was, by the grace of God, able to put vision above reality, beauty above brutality, forgiveness above revenge, hope above the horrors of apartheid. I read Mandela's autobiography as I traveled throughout Africa, and I was recreated by the power of his story. At one point, toward the end of his imprisonment, Mandela writes:

I have found that one can bear the unbearable if one can keep one's spirits strong even when ones body is being tested. Strong convictions are the secret of surviving deprivation; your spirit can be full even when your stomach is empty...I always knew that someday I would once again feel the grass under my feet and walk in the sunshine as a free man. I am fundamentally an optimist. Part of being an optimist is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun... one's feet moving forward.

Today, Jesus tells us that Christians do not escape the great tribulations, the political and economic and personal traumas of this world. We experience them just like everybody else—and sometimes we are the perpetrators as well as the victims. The difference is that Christians stand up, we raise our heads and we look at the sun, while always keeping our hearts moving forward.

And the reason is, that even though bad things happen to good people, we trust that God is still in charge. God is behind history, God is embedded in history, and God is marching in front of history, beckoning us toward the fulfillment of God's dream of salvation, of wholeness for all God's people.

And as we wait for the full redemption of the world, we, the people of God, are called to be the image, the faint shadow of God's full and vivid presence for all God's children. Yes, we are called to bear hope for the world. This hope cannot be bought and wrapped and put under a Christmas tree. This hope cannot be squirreled away in a stock portfolio for safekeeping. This hope cannot be won with bombs or bullets or 21st-century state-of-the-art artillery. And most certainly this hope cannot be hoarded by Americans at the expense of the rest of the world. Brothers and sisters in Christ, the hope we carry is the birthright of every child, everywhere in God's whole, weary, wonderful world.

Two Sundays ago I had the privilege of preaching in the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Alexandra Township in Johannesburg. Despite the comfort and safety of the new building paid for by your mission dollars, we were surrounded by the tin shacks, the polluted streets, the deplorable poverty created during the fifty years of apartheid tyranny. Though ideologically apartheid is dead, physically it still lives in the deprivation and despair of an impoverished people. And yet worship in that astounding place becomes, each week, a refreshing fountain of joy and hope. As I preached, the passionate pastor of that congregation, Maake Masongo, translated my words into dialect, giving them an energy that revitalized every bone in my body. The music was rich, rhythmic, harmonious, the only instruments being the human voice and the gentle beating of the hymnbooks. And then there was the rocking dancing, swaying motion of the singers. By the end of the service I was rocking and swaying and singing with them—and the pastor made my day by suggesting that I was part Zulu woman!

At the end of the service the children came forward, and I was invited to pray for them and with them. What a privilege that moment was! As I looked into those eager, ebony faces, as I touched each of those precious children with the blessings of Christ, I saw the future—their future, our future, the world's future. Yes, I was given a moment of vision—a God's eye view of the way things are meant to be. And it was a vision of life, abundant life for all.

Friends, today we light the first candle in a four-week journey through the darkness of Advent. Rather than hiding inside the secular sentimentality of the Christmas cocoon, we have opened our eyes to see the chaos of the cosmos, to recognize with a God's eye view both the beauty and the bruises of this world. And so, with eyes looking up, let us wait for the full redemption of the world—a world fully created in the image of the God, who was and is and always will be.

May it be so—for you and for me. Amen.