

Heads Up!

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“Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption
is drawing near.” – Luke 21:28

I think one of the reasons pastors have caved in to the pressure to ignore Advent is because we're not much more comfortable with that awkward season than our parishioners are. And Advent is awkward. While everyone else is gearing up for Christmas, we're hunkering down to face the second coming. Or at least that's what we're supposed to be doing.

The word Advent is the Latin translation of the Greek word *parousia*, which means “arrival” or “coming” or “presence.” In our Bible, that word is used 24 times, seven of them to mean the ordinary arrival or physical presence of somebody.

In 1 Corinthians 16:17, for example, Paul writes, “I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus arrived,” and he uses a form of that word *parousia*.

He also uses a form of the word *parousia* when he quotes what others say about him, which isn't flattering. In his second letter to the Corinthians (10:10) he writes, “For some say, 'His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person' – there's that word *parousia* – 'in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.'” Apparently, not all the folks at Corinth put Paul on the pedestal that later Christian tradition built for him.

So the word *parousia* has an ordinary, everyday meaning in the New Testament. But in the majority of cases, it refers to the second coming of Christ – sixteen of its twenty-four occurrences. And not once is the word used for Jesus' first coming as a baby. So our word Advent comes from a Greek word for the second coming of Christ, and that's what Advent is really about – Christ's second coming, which is the basis of Christian hope.

That's why our gospel reading for this First Sunday in Advent is from the twenty-first chapter of Luke and not from the first chapter of Luke. Advent starts at the back of the story of the historical Jesus. Or we might say that Advent starts where the story of the historical Jesus leaves off. And the reason for that is because the historical Jesus did and did not change everything, and the five evangelists who wrote his story – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul – knew that.

They knew that they lived in a different world because Jesus the Christ had been present in it, but they also were honest enough to admit that much of the world was as lousy as it had been before the first coming of that Christ. The Christ may indeed have introduced Christianity into the world, but Christianity has yet to live up to its world-changing potential. For that, the world needs not the arrival of a baby in a manger, but the arrival of the Human One on clouds of glory.

And that's what both Luke and Paul are talking about in our New Testament lessons this morning. Luke quotes Jesus, who is delivering a sermon that scholars sometimes call “The Little Apocalypse.” The big Apocalypse is the book of Revelation, which some of us will begin studying in a few minutes. The Little Apocalypse is a sermon about things getting worse before they get better for Jesus' followers but that this is good news in disguise.

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars," Jesus says, "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." Scary stuff, sure enough, and that's where most Christians have focused their attention over the centuries, and many of us have lost our heads during those times. Many – but not all of us.

May 19, 1780, was once known in American history as the "wonderful dark day of May" because of an unprecedented obscuring of sunlight that enveloped much of New England in midday gloom. The obstruction was likely caused by a combination of smoke from an extensive forest fire in Ontario, Canada, thick fog along much of the eastern seaboard, and heavy cloud cover from an oncoming spring rain. In Rupert, New York, things appeared abnormal already at sunrise, and Professor Samuel Williams of Harvard College said that Cambridge, Massachusetts, was in gloom by 10:30 in the morning. The Connecticut legislature was in session that day, and as the darkness advanced, a number of its Calvinist members, who knew their Bible, believed that Jesus' words in today's gospel reading were literally coming to pass. They expected the Son of Man to arrive shortly, and so some of them, quite predictably, went all Chicken Little and fell into a pious panic. Some dropped to their knees to pray. Some wept. Some urged that the chamber be dismissed so that they might go home to be taken up in rapture with their families.

But the story goes that Abraham Davenport, from Stamford, rose to address his colleagues. "I am against adjournment," he said. "The day of judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for an adjournment; if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought." Candles were brought and the session continued with its appointed tasks.

Is that not what Jesus' words are about – doing our duty as followers of the Christ, regardless of whether our time to do so be long or short? And you can't do that looking down. Abraham Davenport lifted up his head, as Jesus urged his followers to do. He kept his head. He succumbed neither to fear nor to despair. He was not confused. He knew who he was and what his calling was. He had kept himself prepared for the day of judgment. He kept calm and he carried on, as the British encouraged each other to do during the awful dark days of the Second World War.

We humans, being pounds of muscle but only ounces of brain, are easily spooked. Many of us are not comfortable in God's creation even under the best of circumstances. We're afraid of the dark. We're afraid of noises we can't identify – and some that we can. Many of us live in a perpetual state of unease, and it's a very short step from our habitual anxiety to full-blown panic.

And the woes we create for ourselves frighten us even more. Every time things go from bad to worse we wonder if we've finally hit rock bottom, and too often discover that we have not. The depth of human depravity sometimes seems bottomless.

I remember one of the first times I felt that the world as I knew it was literally falling to pieces. It was in March of 1980 and I was studying journalism and religion at college. I was in the news room in Ernie Pyle Hall, which housed Indiana University's School of Journalism, when the AP and UPI wire services transmitted the bulletin that Archbishop Oscar Romero, the highest ranking Catholic official in El Salvador and one of the great champions of the poor and oppressed in Latin America, had been assassinated as he celebrated mass in a hospital chapel. We were stunned.

None of us, Catholic or Protestant or secular, could imagine how anyone could have gunned down a priest in the midst of celebrating the Eucharist – a priest who had devoted his life to denouncing the appalling and massive abuses of human rights that characterized Central America during the 1970s and 80s. Archbishop Romero preached and worked tirelessly on behalf of the poor,

the marginalized, the disenfranchised, and the “disappeared” – the people who were kidnapped and murdered by right-wing death squads acting with the tacit approval of corrupt governments. Our own government, engaged yet again in proxy warfare with the Soviet Union, fueled much of the killing with arms sales and foreign aid that lined the pockets of dirty politicians.

The Catholic Church in Central America was deeply divided, with some going along to get along, some saying the church should stay out of politics, and some, like Archbishop Romero, speaking up and speaking out against sinful behavior, wherever it was found. One of his friends, Fr. Rutillio Grande, had also been murdered for speaking out against the grinding and unrelenting abuse of the poor, and when four Catholic women missionaries from the United States were raped, beaten, and murdered just months after Archbishop Romero's assassination, many of us wondered if the end of the world had actually arrived. We couldn't fathom how much more evil the world could get than that.

Lift up your heads, Jesus said, when things look really, really bad. Lift up your heads when you can't imagine how things could get worse. Lift up your heads when the leaders and the structures and the systems in which you have placed your trust for so long have turned on you and are now in the grip of the demonic. Lift up your heads and do not be afraid because your redemption is drawing near.

We Christians have trivialized redemption to mean going to heaven to be with Jesus. Redemption is to be with Christ, to be sure – but it is to be with Christ in this world as well as in any world to come. And if we are not in solidarity with Jesus in this world – and in solidarity with the world he came to save – then we have no right to expect to be with him in any world to come.

To be redeemed literally means to be brought back to the state for which we were created and intended. To be redeemed is to be fully human and fully divine – as Jesus the Christ is. To be redeemed is to be restored to our full humanity as unsullied images of our creator. Our redemption draws near when the Human One – the Son of Man in our lesson from Luke – draws near to us, drawing us closer to our true selves. And we cannot see the approach of the Human One with our heads down.

About six weeks ago, on the 14th of October, Archbishop Oscar Romero was made a saint of the Catholic Church. The church lifted up its head and recognized Romero's life for the witness to the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that it was. Redemption drew near to the church – fallen and imperfect as it remains – and in the instance of Romero, the church responded. The church responded to the call of Christ to show to the world what it means to be faithful unto death.

Will the church lift up its head again and recognize as saints the four women missionaries who also lost their lives for the sake of Jesus Christ? Will it also recognize as saints the six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter who were murdered in 1989 by a death squad that included nineteen graduates of the U. S. School of the Americas?

For that matter, will the church – not just the Catholic Church, but the big church – will it also recognize as martyrs – that is, witnesses to the faith of Jesus Christ – the nine persons of color gunned down during a 2015 midweek prayer service in Charleston, South Carolina by a white man filled with racial hate? Will it also recognize as martyrs and saints the 26 people killed in the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas in 2017?

Can we, the church, see our redemption drawing near each time hate rises up with a gun in its hand to slay the righteous at prayer – whether they be Christians in Ohio, Sikhs in Wisconsin, or Jews in Pennsylvania? Can we see our crucified and risen Savior in the murdered faithful, regardless of their creed?

And if the church cannot or will not, will we, as a people? Will we recognize our redemption drawing near as a wave of desperately poor and desperately frightened and desperately desperate

refugees from poverty and violence and corruption approaches our southern border? Will we lift up our heads to see the approach of the crucified and risen Christ among them – and the chance for us to draw near to Christ – or will we turn our backs, shut them out, tear-gas them, and send them back to misery?

Friends, we liberal Christians need to remember that we will be judged. All of us, without exception. That is foundational Christian teaching, and we ignore it at our own spiritual peril. In another of those apocalyptic passages in the gospels, this one from Matthew, we are told in terms that are crystal clear what the standards are by which we will be judged, by history and beyond history.

When I was hungry, you gave me food. When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was sick or in prison, you cared for me.

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Mt. 25.37-41).

“Christ plays in ten thousand places” the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, and most of us are blind to those daily divine visitations and those daily opportunities to draw near to our redemption – the recovery of our humanity as God's images in the world -- which daily draws near to us. Can we see the Christ massed on our southern border in the faces of the women, children, and men who are fleeing poverty and gang violence in Central America that is largely fueled by America's insatiable appetite for illegal drugs? Can we see the opportunity we have to lift up our heads to be the people we'd like to believe we are? We squandered that opportunity on September 11, 2001, when we had the chance to show the world a better way out of violence. Instead, we reared up in vengeful fury, and remain, seventeen years later, entangled in an unwinnable war.

And yet – and here is the loving mystery of our faith and the message of Advent – there is hope. Not because of us – oh, no, not because of us – but rather because of the faithfulness of God which broods over the world with “warm breast and ah! bright wings” (Hopkins again). God reaches out to us, again and again and again, waiting for us to respond not with a clenched fist, but rather with an open, outstretched hand, perhaps bearing the imprint of a nail.