

Year C, Advent 1

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Luke 21:25-36

In Advent We Await Full Humanity

A friend of mine (Paul Neuchterlein) recently published a startling quote on his Facebook page that I want to share with you. The quote is from Walter Wink, a theologian and thinker I greatly admire. He wrote:

And this is the revelation: God is HUMAN...It is the great error of humanity to believe that it is human. We are only fragmentarily human, fleetingly human, brokenly human. We see glimpses of our humanness, we can only dream of what a more human existence and political order would be like, but we have not yet arrived at true humanness. Only God is human, and we are made in God's image and likeness—which is to say, we are capable of becoming human. (Walter Wink, The Human Being, p 26)

On this first Sunday of Advent we begin our wait for the arrival of the Human One, the full revelation of what it means to be human and the One who makes our becoming human possible.

We start our preparation with an assessment of our need, an inventory of the challenges that face us. In the symbolic language of the heart we read, "There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves." These are poetic ways of saying things will be operating out of pattern; unprecedented, unpredictable, unnerving. Seemingly uncontrollable forces will be welling up from the deep causing the sea to roar and the waves to surge. The human heart is the place of the deep. Rivalry, vengeance, hatred, chaos, and dark moods spill from the depth where they have been out of sight, out of mind and out of consciousness. They surprise us with their crudeness, barbarism and attractiveness.

I am thinking here of Trump's improbable campaign and popularity that has baffled all the experts. How can Trump speak so arrogantly, despising almost everyone else and flaunting his own glory, and still be taken seriously by so many? How can he ridicule the weak, handicapped and female and not plummet in the polls? Our wisest national observers keep predicting he will go too far but so far it hasn't happened—maybe next week. What dark place in our national psyche has he touched?

I am thinking here of Isis and al-Qaeda, two movements that attract many lonely, lost and angry young people and enlists them in a cause they believe gives them purpose. Committed to purifying the world as their purpose they blow up the relics of ancient civilizations, treat women as abused property and glory in cruelty; competing with one another for who can be the cruelest. And they do all this in the name of God. Where do these dark impulses come

from? What is it about the human heart that makes indiscriminant revenge more valuable to them than life itself?

“The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.” To me this is saying confidence in the future as that which flows from the present and the past will be shaken resulting in fear and foreboding. Isn't that the elephant in the room? The challenges we face look different to us than those we have ever faced before. We don't know quite what to do. We are beginning to suspect our violence in response to their violence will only create more and deeper violence in the long run.

That seems to be our experience in the Middle East. Every time we intervene it only seems to make it worse and creates more enemies that we then must subdue. And what we do over there seems to somehow infect us in ways we had not anticipated. Our own lonely and disaffected young people catch the violent spirit and turn it on ourselves in random ways that make us all afraid. Many of our warriors come home broken and unable to sustain families and careers in the years ahead of them. How do we pay for all of this and still maintain our own educational and transportation infrastructure? This is our world of early Advent, but our text doesn't stop there.

“Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great spender.” The Human One is coming! He is coming from another place, not this place where everything seems so crazy. His power will be convincing and self-evident, nonviolent and full of truth. It will be so obvious, attractive, radiant and splendid that we will wonder why we had never seen it before. Our imitative souls will begin imitating kindness, gentleness, generosity, compassion and love, all seen in the Human One who comes toward us, visible to all as though on a cloud.

“Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.” The Advent world is the world where these things are beginning to happen but we are not all the way there yet. If you know how to look you see little signs; messages of hope breaking in through the television, behaviors in young people that evidence caring for the earth and the beaten down people who live on it, new ways of thinking that question the age-old equation of violence equaling order. When you see these things happening, stand up straight, and raise your heads, your redemption is near. I do see these signs everywhere. But you have to know where to look and you have to choose to see them.

“Jesus told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near.’” If you want to see these signs you have to look on things that are living. Rocks don't sprout leaves and neither do rifles or bayonets or bombs. If you watch where life is happening, where cells are vital and green, where people have hope and care for one another, where laughter and smiles can be seen even when in the midst of challenge and distress; well then you can see for yourself that summer is near. “In the same way,” Jesus said, “when you see these things happening, you know that God's kingdom is near.”

You see, God's kingdom is that place wherein full-humanness gets lived-out. This is the place where full-humanness is not just glimpsed but finds expression in the political, economic, environmental and social way humans live together.

"I assure you," Jesus continues, "that this generation won't pass away until everything has happened." This generation does not refer to those living at the time Jesus lived. It refers to the time between Jesus living among us as a human and his return in power in some form we cannot imagine. In this period of time, the time in which we live, lots of things will happen. These things have to happen for us to have any chance at finding our way out of our early Advent darkness toward light we, as a species, often prefer to avoid. Will we find our way or will we destroy ourselves as a species? We don't know yet. All we know is that "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away."

In the meantime, while we wait, Jesus has some advice for us. Focus on the signs of spring, allowing those to energize us and keep us positive. Look for the good things happening in the world and contribute to them.

"Take care that your hearts aren't dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life." That certainly is another approach to early Advent dark times but it's not very effective. It tends to lead to depression, draggy hung-over mornings, and poor calculations on necessary preparation. "Don't let the day fall upon you unexpectedly, like a trap. It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth." All religions, all races, all ethnic divisions and classes are going to see this happen. With modern communications and rapid mass transportation it's getting easier to imagine an event that simultaneously impacts every human being on the earth.

And finally, "Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand before the Human One." Why stay alert, praying for strength? Because we all are about to meet the Human One who turns out to be God, made visible in Jesus, the one who created us and works endlessly to bring us into full humanity. Thanks be to God. Amen.