

Year C, Advent 1

November 29th, 2018

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Luke 21:25-36

We Yearn for Full Humanity

A friend of mine recently published a startling quote on his Facebook page. The quote, from Walter Wink, a theologian and thinker I greatly admire, reads like this:

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)

Let me read that a second time.

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 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. Seemly uncontrollable forces will be welling up from the deep causing the sea to roar and waves to surge. Of course we think of global warming with the melting of the ice cap and the rising of the sea, and smoke that obscures the sun, moon and stars in California. Are these signs?

The human heart is also a place of the deep. For reasons unknown to most of us, rivalry, vengeance, hatred, chaos, and dark moods spill out from the depths where they have been out of sight, out of mind and out of consciousness. They surprise us with their crudeness, barbarism and strange attractiveness—yes, I say strange attractiveness because something within us is fascinated by primitive violence.

In our country we wait with baited breath for the next lone gunman to appear in a school, in the window of a hotel overlooking the town square or at our local mall on a busy shopping day.

Where do these dark impulses come from? What is it about the human heart that makes indiscriminant revenge more valuable 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.” 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 our enemies’ violence only create more and deeper violence but we don’t know what to do differently.

That seems to be our experience in the Middle East. Every time we intervene it only makes it worse and creates more enemies that we then must subdue. Plus what we do over there seems to 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. And there is the practical question of how do we pay for all of this and still maintain our own schools and roads? 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 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 those 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. These signs are everywhere. But we have to know where to look and we 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, bayonets or bombs. If you watch where life is happening, where cells are vital and green, where people have love and care for one another, where laughter and smiles can be seen even in the midst of

challenges 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 where God’s humanness is fully revealed. This is the place where our potential is not just glimpsed but finds expression in the political, economic, environmental and social ways humans live together.

“I assure you,” Jesus continues, “that this generation won’t pass away until everything has happened.” Is the cross and resurrection “the everything” that will happen? It is certainly the key event around which history pivots. Maybe this generation does not refer to those living at the time Jesus lived. Maybe 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, many 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 the light we, as a species, often prefer to avoid. Will we find our way or will we destroy ourselves as a species? Will Jesus come because we have embraced his forgiving and merciful way or will he come to resurrect our destroyed bodies after we have incinerated ourselves? We don’t know. 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 you and keep you positive. Look for the good things happening in the world and contribute to them. Christmas is a wonderful time to support anything that looks like swelling buds soon to burst into life.

Finally, “Take care that your hearts aren’t dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life.” Such things are certainly another approach to early Advent darkness but it’s not very effective. It leads to depression, draggy hung-over mornings, and poor calculations on necessary preparation. So, “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 mass transportation it’s getting easier to imagine an event that impacts every human being on the earth simultaneously.

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.” We are all going to stand before the Human One who created us and works endlessly to bring us into full humanity. Amen.