

The Shake Up

(Isa 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matt 24:36-44)

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The Gospel reading that starts off Advent each year is disturbing and confusing. Jesus describes a catastrophe that lies ahead in apocalyptic terms, not what you would imagine as a good way of introducing the run up to the coming of the “Prince of Peace.”

It is intentional. As we enter Advent, we are not supposed to feel too stable or too comfortable. Our tradition is designed to discourage us from thinking that the way we receive the baby Jesus, no longer requires close attention, as though we already know how things will turn out. It’s too easy after “how many times?” to believe that what is coming somehow conforms to what we knew all along. That’s how we miss his coming.

A “shake up” has to come before Jesus is born in our hearts on Christmas Eve. A shake up that is reminiscent of, but also differs from the shake up that takes place on Easter morning, when the disciples experience an “earthquake,” and are overcome by terror and confusion as they realize that Jesus is really being raised from the dead. In both seasons, stable ground gives way. What was thought to be stable ground falls away before his coming.

This morning's Gospel reading serves this purpose. It paints for us a stressful scene, of people being overtaken as by a flood. Everyone is eating and drinking happily, feeling as though everything is going just great. And suddenly there is mayhem. One is taken and another is left. And there seems to be no rhyme or reason to it. For all anyone can see, the ones who are taken are no better or worse than the ones who are left.

The experience is like that of seeing an earthquake happening in a bowl of water, dispersing the clear reflection on the surface of what we thought were looking at. We are left with ripples colliding back and forth in a bewildering way. To our dismay, what we thought we were seeing becomes a jumble of indiscipherable fragments.

Gazing into this bowl of confusion presented to us by the Gospel reading, we recognize that it is in many ways not so different from the way we often experience our own reality today.

The first reading from Isaiah adds another ingredient to the church's "recipe" for Advent. It points to a coming resolution to the dire situation at hand, reminding us of God's promise of a peace to come:

“they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

But how can this be, we wonder? How can we be saved from this catastrophe that overwhelms us like a flood? What good is it to be alert, in a situation so confusing that we can't even understand the right and wrong in what is happening?

And in answer to that question, the Epistle reading offer us a third ingredient to consider. It is as though the Apostle Paul is throwing us a life preserver on a rope when, to our dismay, we have been tossed overboard and are being swallowed by the turbulent waves of the storm. He throws us a rope to which, we must hold on for dear life. We must have faith and hold fast.

And that third thing, that rope to which we must hold fast, is the practice of the moral and ethical behaviors that we have been taught.

We are to quote:

... live honorably... not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, (we are to) put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Some of this may sound a bit morally uptight to our modern ears. Who doesn't enjoy a couple of beers and a bit of revelry? But Paul is referring to much more than what we usually think of as "desires of the flesh", much more than drinking and eating too much, smoking cigarettes, seeking sexual gratification or what have you.

The desires of the flesh include the sheer physical enjoyment that comes with such things as winning an argument or seeing someone go down in flames who we think deserves it or letting off steam about someone, by talking behind that person's back or the relief that comes with telling someone off. All you have to do is watch an episode of *Geraldo* and see how much the audience enjoys ripping apart the villains on stage, to see that these too are among the "desires of the flesh."

We are all very susceptible to them. But as our weekly confessions remind us, this is not about us good guys over here versus those bad guys over there. It is about all of us. We all are susceptible to becoming part of the problem; susceptible to those moments, when "the thief" sneaks into the house and steals what is most precious to us, that treasure being the integrity of our relationships and our ability to love

each other. The thief slips in and suddenly we are being swallowed up in his ocean of mayhem and confusion.

When Paul points to our practicing good moral behavior as a way of being alert, he helps us to also see what Jesus is getting at in the Gospel reading, when he advises us to be like the owner of a house who watches through the night to prevent the thief from entering unexpectedly.

Jesus is exhorting us to express our alertness by continuing to diligently practice the caring and respectful behaviors we have been taught – remembering, for example, the lessons we learned when Dad pulled us out of the sandbox for kicking over the other person’s castle, or what we learned from our Sunday school teachers or from the hearing of the scripture over the years, and this extends to such things as being alert and diligent in the way we show respect for others by saying “please” and “thank you” and listening respectfully to their opinions.

All these practices are the equivalent of locking the door, shutting the downstairs windows and following the checklist of ways in which we secure “the house” at night to prevent the thief from making a surprise entry and having his way.

Because the most important struggle for us as Christians is not the struggle without, but the struggle within. It is the struggle to not let ourselves be broken into and inhabited by the “thief” who would ransack and spoil all that is truly precious in our possession. It is the struggle to avoid being possessed by the “desires of the flesh.”

Of course, God did not create us solely so that we might struggle within ourselves. God’s intention is that his divine love and care might be extended to all the world through us. And yet, it is not possible to bring order to another person’s house while one’s own house is being ransacked, or to throw a life preserver to another person, without first having one’s own feet planted firmly on the deck.

Story of Thanksgiving

I realize that I’ve been talking mostly in metaphors. So I’d like to put it this into the form of a brief story.

Once upon a time, just before Christmas, there was a fellow, one among many millions, on his way home to spend the holiday with his family. We will call him GC, short for “God’s child”, which could be any one.

Sitting in the airplane seat, GC's thoughts turned to his family and what had happened on his last visit on Thanksgiving the year before.

It had started out in a fairly uneventful way. Everyone seemed to have done quite well for themselves. As with any family, there were some negative undercurrents, a grudge or two. But sitting at the table together, their differences seemed distant and unimportant.

GC sat between his two sisters. On the left, his sister the homemaker. Her husband was sick and had taken a raincheck, but you could hear their two kids playing on the carpet in the living room. On the other side of the table was his younger sister, single, a successful hotel manager. Across the table, sat his older brother, a patent lawyer – very successful and the apple of his father's eye, "capable of doing no wrong". And next to his brother, his brother's wife, also a lawyer. And then there was GC, a teacher, and feeling pretty good about where he had taken his first grade class this year. And at each end Mom and Dad.

The dinner started out with some small talk as everybody shared a little bit about what was going on in their lives. Dad nodded approvingly, taking pleasure in how well things were going for his kids, especially pleased, it seemed, with the successes of his older son.

Then it happened. Dinner was over and every one was relaxing over coffee or a glass of sherry. Dad looked over at his older son meaningfully, then turned to G.C. and said, “Well how is it going with the kiddies?”, the two barely able to keep from smirking. Looking back on it, GC realized that he had overreacted. But in the moment the anger shot through him like a meteor that would not be denied.

“You think what I do is funny, do you? You think that your precious son who helps corporations make bigger profits is doing what real men do, but helping a room full of children grow up is worthless? You think everything he does is perfect and no matter what I do, you think it’s nonsense. And what makes you think your approval matters to me? Do you think you are God or something?”

And that was just the start. The words came out hard and fast and furious, sucking the joy out of the evening; words that were followed by things said on all sides, meant to be helpful, but all of which only seemed to make matters worse. That night GC checked into a hotel and the next day he flew home.

On the way home his heart ached with remorse, with uncertainties and recriminations. He wasn’t sure whether what he had done was right or wrong. He knew he was partly right. But he also knew that he must be

partly wrong, because he didn't feel good inside. He loved his family and he loved his dad in spite of their disagreements. And he knew that his dad loved him too. What should have been a joyful feast had been stolen from them all by the way his anger had burst in and taken him over.

As GC looked at his life, he felt as though he was looking at an earthquake in a bowl. What had seemed like a smooth surface, reflecting back to him a clear vision of a well ordered world, now felt shattered by a confusion of waves coming together from every direction. It seemed impossible to be sure which direction right and wrong were coming from.

GC felt that he had to do something positive; something good to atone for the situation. He was not ready to talk to his family, because he wasn't sure whether what would come out of his mouth would be helpful or only make things worse.

He prayed about it. And a voice came to him, as though someone had thrown him a lifeline. The voice said, "Remember when you were a child and your Sunday school teacher Mrs. Jones, taught you how to be kind to other people? Do you remember how good she made you feel, because of the way she treated you? And do you remember how, on

your graduation day, your father surprised you, by telling you he was proud of you, even though you knew he was disappointed by the major you had chosen? Do that. Don't worry about who is right and who is wrong. Just do that and leave the judgment to God." And so that is what G.C focused on.

GC's thoughts wandered back to the present. A year had passed and now he was going home for Christmas again. He had talked to his father before setting up the flight, and it seemed to him that there was a softness in his father's voice and in himself, that made him think that somehow they were might be growing closer in an unspoken way. And this time GC felt a special excitement that hadn't been there the year before, a feeling of anticipation that something good was going to happen; that whatever happened now, for him it this was going to be a special Christmas.

Epilogue

In these turbulent and uncertain times, when the thief is busy breaking into people's lives and trying to steal the treasure of love we have for one another, hold the line. Let this Advent season be for us, not a time for debauchery or quarreling or being lax in gratifying the desires of the flesh. But let it be an opportunity to diligently practice the disciplines

that will secure our houses and protect us from the “thief.” Let us be honorable, kind, honest, respectful and generous, leaving the judgment in God’s hands. For a little child is soon to be born and we want to be ready and receptive, when he comes.