Signs in the Sun, Moon, and Stars

A sermon offered by Ledlie I. Laughlin

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36 ~ December 1, 2024 ~ First Sunday of Advent

When I was a child, our family spent summers in Vermont. A favorite adventure was a hike to what we knew as “the top of the world” – there to pick wild strawberries in June, blackberries in August. Off the dirt road, up through the neighbor’s field, along the rutted path in the birch forest, finally emerging into the sunlight, with near 360 degree views.

We often stopped along the way to explore the stone foundations of a long abandoned settlement, to hear once again the stories of how the Millerites had lived there, then dispersed. William Miller, a farmer and lay preacher in nearby northeastern New York, was caught up in the evangelical fervor of the Great Awakening of the early 1820’s. Miller read signs from the stars that the second coming, the Second Advent of Christ was at hand. Convinced was he that the prophets’ foretelling of the destruction of the Temple was a clear sign of Christ’s coming and the end of the world.

His teachings grew in popularity and when he predicted the very day that Christ would come – October 22, 1844 – the faithful built entire communities to gather, pray, prepare, and await that glorious hour. Well, what followed thereafter became known as the Great Disappointment. Local sheriffs carried more than a few souls off to nearby asylums so distraught had they become. On a warm summer day, our little top of the world seemed a very good place indeed to await the great conflagration.

Jesus said, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars; distress among the nations. People will faint from fear and foreboding” – signs in the cosmos. “Look at the fig tree,” said he: pay attention to the little changes close at hand, just before you. “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up, raise your head… you know that the kingdom of God is near.” “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to stand before the Son of Man.”

The Roman army destroyed the Great Temple of Jerusalem in the year 70 of the Christian Era. Scholars believe that Luke compiled and composed his Gospel, this Gospel, in the year 85, some fifteen years later. Thus, Luke is addressing Jesus’s words to a people whose lives have been utterly devastated.

This genre of apocalyptic literature – of the end times and the cataclysmic events beforehand – this genre arises in those seasons when the people of God experience crushing loss; it speaks to those searching for hope. Today’s reading, Luke’s Gospel, joins *historical* events – the temple’s destruction – with events *beyond history*: the coming of the cosmic Christ. Apocalypse mixes what’s going on – in the news, as it were – with what’s really going on – in the fulness of God. Pay attention. Watch. Keep alert.

What do you suppose this Word offers to us – interlacing, as it does, the anguish of loss with irrepressible hope in God’s promise? Is apocalyptic literature just about the right genre and antidote for this hour? We look at what’s going on around us. We are invited to wonder, what’s really going on around us? Are there signs of redemption just here, before us – in the stars and seas, or in the changing leaves, the call of birdsong?

Advent is born of an awareness that we are caught up in movements and forces far greater than ourselves. I trust you’ve had the experience of watching the night sky, lying on your back perhaps on a summer night, looking to the vast darkness, losing yourself in wonder, coming to the realization that you are little more than the blade of grass beside you. Or, that you have had the experience while swimming in the ocean of being caught by a wave, your body simultaneously pushed, pulled, churned about like so much flotsam and jetsam. The ocean deep overwhelming in its force.

Wrote former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, “Advent is a season of powerlessness in which we are invited to set aside the various ways we seek to reassure ourselves that we are in control of our lives….”

So much of the time, we live with ourselves as our primary point of reference, as if the events of the world revolved around us. Filled with our hopes, ambitions; flooded by our fears and anxieties, we see only through our own lens. *This* experience makes me happy, so I’m happy and the world is good. *That* experience makes me sad, so now I’m glum and the world is grim. It is well and good that we are warned about this Advent time. The coming of the kingdom represents the ‘end of the world’ in the psychological sense that it is the end of an old order and the establishment of a new order of being.

“Advent is a season in which we get in touch with the deep yearning, the heartache, the soul hunger that emerges when we are stripped of our defenses and obliged to admit that the permanencies upon which we had erected our security are shifting sand rather than rock.” (F.Griswold)

When these things take place, we are not to flee; no. Stand up; raise your head; pray that you may have courage and grace for the coming of God. The prophets yearned for a very big God to do very big things. Shall we not pray for a very big God to do very big things?

Ascending once again to the top of the world, brimful with anticipation, I’ll close with a poem: “The Journey” by David Whyte ~

Above the mountains  
the geese turn into  
the light again

Painting their  
black silhouettes  
on an open sky.

Sometimes everything  
has to be  
inscribed across  
the heavens

so you can find  
the one line  
already written  
inside you.

Sometimes it takes  
a great sky  
to find that

first, bright  
and indescribable  
wedge of freedom  
in your own heart.

Sometimes with  
the bones of the black  
sticks left when the fire  
has gone out

someone has written  
something new  
in the ashes of your life.

You are not leaving.  
Even as the light fades quickly now,  
you are arriving.

In this Advent season, dear ones, watch, pray, lift up your heads; our Christ draws nigh. Amen.