

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2009
REV. WILLIAM LOVE

YOUR REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR

Jeremiah 33:14-16
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Look at the fig tree, and all the trees; as soon as they come out in leaf, the summer is already near, Jesus said.

The seasons do not come abruptly. Gradual changes foretell the season to come.

Fall has always been my favorite season of the year. I love when the temperatures begin to get low enough that there is a little nip in the air — not enough to get out a heavy coat but to at least check on where you have put your sweaters. And the leaves begin to change color. The colors are not the light, pastel colors of spring, but the deep, rich, darker hues of red and gold. Those are my favorite colors.

The Fall does not sneak up on us. It comes somewhat gradually. But Fall does foretell that winter is coming.

The first winter I lived in West Virginia, it snowed the first week I was there, and the snow cover lasted until the middle of March.

In my fifth winter, at five o'clock in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, 1983, the temperature was one degree below zero. The wind chill factor was 53 degrees below zero. After the sun went down, it began to get really cold. That night, I drove 35 miles in the blowing snow on icy roads over a mountain (where, at one place, one lane of the road had crumbled down the side of the mountain) to lead a Christmas Eve worship service for a congregation which did not have a pastor. The overnight low was 24 degrees below, which did not set any records but is plenty cold enough if you happened to grow up in the South.

As beautiful as Fall in West Virginia can be and as much as I love Fall, it foretold a season that would be harsh.

There is for many people a similar kind of attitude toward the apocalyptic writings in Scripture, those portions of Scripture which talk in cryptic imagery about the signs of the end of the age. We seem attracted to it and fascinated by it, even if we are not quite sure we will at all like the season that it foretells.

Jesus speaks about an approaching season. *And there will be, he says, signs in sun and moon and stars and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and in the foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the power of the heavens will be shaken.*

Scary stuff that. Not at all what we might expect for Advent — that time when we await the baby to be born, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger.

And, as we think about this passage (and other apocalyptic passages), those passages which seem to talk about the end time, we are fascinated (perhaps only in the voyeuristic way that we must look as we pass a wreck on the highway) and perhaps a bit frightened.

Those who speak in language of the end time are never solely talking about end time. They are talking about our times, our contemporary situation, and giving it a sense of urgency by comparing it with a day yet to come.

And that talk is of heaven and earth being shaken, of change that is coming whether we like it or not, of circumstances beyond our control that will take us along with them in their sweep, of people fainting with fear and in the foreboding of what is coming on the world.

The thought of it is filled with fear. It tells us about who we already are.

We are a fearful people, one priest says. It often seems that fear has invaded every part of our being to such a degree that we no longer know what a life without fear would feel like. There is always something to fear: something within us or around us, something close or far away, something visible or invisible, something in ourselves, in others, or in God. There never seems to be a totally fear-free moment. When we think, talk, act or react, fear always seems to be there: an omnipresent force that we cannot shake off. Often fear has penetrated our inner selves so deeply that it controls, whether we are aware of it or not, most of our choices and decisions.

The things and people we think about, worry about, reflect upon, prepare ourselves for, and spend time and energy on are in large part determined by a world which seduces us into accepting its fearful questions.

*Look at the many **if** questions we raise: "What am I going to do if I do not find a spouse, a house, a job, a friend...? What am I going to do if they fire me, if I get sick, if an accident happens, if I lose my friends, if my marriage does not work out? ... What if someone steals my money, breaks into my house, rapes my daughter, or kills me?"*

*Listen also to the many **how** questions: "How can I raise my children in a world threatened by total destruction? ... How can I succeed on my own as an adult? How can I keep my good name among my neighbors? How can I make it to heaven?"*

A huge network of anxious questions surround us and begin to guide many, if not most, of our daily decisions. Clearly, those who can pose these fearful questions which bind us from within have true power over us. For hidden under their questions lies the threat that not following their directions will make our worst fears come true. Once we accept these questions as our own, and are convinced we must find answers to them, we become more and more settled in the house of fear.

Much of our educational, political, religious, and even social lives [is] geared to finding answers to questions born of fear.

Fearful questions never lead to love-filled answers; underneath every fearful question many other fearful questions are hidden.

Once I have decided that in order to have a child I must be able to offer that child a college education, I get caught in many new, anxious questions involving my job, the place I live, the friends I make, and so on. ...

Once I believe that God is out to get me for my bad behavior, complicated moral schemes start to occupy my mind.

*Once I conclude that I cannot be happy without influential friends, I am in for quite an anxiety-producing social life. [Henri Nouwen, **Lifesigns**, 15-18]*

One of the forms this fear can take is trying to manipulate by our will, by our own abilities, the power the things we fear have over us, to maneuver

ourselves into a position to escape most of the hardships (while really seeking to avoid all the distress that will have people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming in the world).

I have known congregation so fearful of their financial situation that they have made that, and not faithfulness, the basis of their decision-making. That may be a particular risk for BPC as we convert the construction loan into a mortgage during a down economy.

I read a parable about this form of fearful response.

Once there was a people who surveyed the resources of the world and said to each other: "How can we be sure that we will have enough in hard times? We want to survive whatever happens. Let us start collecting food, materials, and knowledge so that we are safe and secure when a crisis occurs."

So they started hoarding, so much and so eagerly that other people protested and said: "You have much more than you need, while we don't have enough to survive. Give us part of your wealth!"

But the fearful hoarders said: "No, no, we need to keep this in case of an emergency, in case things go bad for us too, in case our lives are threatened."

*But the others said: "We are dying **now**, please give us food and materials and knowledge to survive. We can't wait...; we need it now!"*

Then the fearful hoarders became even more fearful, since they became afraid that the poor and hungry would attack them. So they said to one another: "Let us build walls around our wealth so that no stranger can take it from us."

They started erecting walls so high that they could not even see anymore whether there were enemies outside the walls or not!

As their fear increased they told each other: "Our enemies have become so numerous that they may be able to tear down our walls. Our walls are not strong enough to keep them away. We need to put bombs on top of the walls so that nobody will dare to even come close to us."

But instead of feeling safe and secure behind their armed walls they found themselves trapped in the prison they had built with their own fear. They even became afraid of their own bombs, wondering if they might harm themselves more than their enemy. And gradually they realized their fear of death had brought them closer to it. [Nouwen, 110-111]

Another form of fear is denial.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (in her book ***On Death and Dying***) describes the stages a terminal patient goes through. The first is *Denial*: to deny the diagnosis is right, to deny the disease is terminal. Denial does not change reality. It only lies about it and fails to deal with it.

The first form of fear will hear the Christmas story and say, Yes, that's beautiful, but we have to be realistic. *The **but** reveals how much we live in the grip of the world.* [Nouwen, 19]

The second form of fear will see in Christmas only a sweet story of a cute, little baby (Christmas is really for kids; that's what it's all about) rather than seeing the Christ child as one capable of shaking heaven and earth.

Fear only engenders fear. Fear never gives birth to love.

And it is **love** whose birth we await.

Paul speaks, in one place, of the world groaning in travail; in another, of the day of the Lord coming upon the earth as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there is no escape from it.

And the word *travail* is the word for labor, for giving birth. Once the pain of labor begins, there is no escape from it. It is not purposeless pain, but it is painful. It is the pain that is necessary to give birth, to give life.

Our world is in travail. And, when we think of those events such as Luke described or as Revelation describes or as any eschatological or apocalyptic literature describes, it is easy to respond with fear because they will be painful.

To bring justice out of social, political, and economic injustice will be painful for everyone, perhaps especially for those like us who have benefitted the most.

To bring psychological and spiritual growth and healing to our relationships with others and with God and even with ourselves will be painful because we cling so tightly to our fears.

My attachment to the world and its goods, to my old self and my familiar and fearful ways of relating, it so strong that it must be wrenched from my hands. And the good news for me is that it will be.

I have even learned good things come with a harsh winter. After a mild winter in New Jersey, the man at the gas station complained that it didn't even get cold enough to kill the bugs. And the beauty of the snow brightens what in the South is bleak with browns and grays.

When the events that shake heaven and earth begin, Jesus says to look up and raise your heads, for your redemption is drawing near.

What is really drawing near is our redemption, just as what is drawing near in labor is the birth of a baby.

In Advent, the travail of the world is Mary's labor in giving birth to Christ. It is God's travail as God enters human life. It is the travail of the Word become flesh at the beginning of the life that leads to the cross. It is our travail at giving up those things which separate us from God and which we hold dear. We find our redemption out of that travail.

The one we wait for in Advent is the one who has already come to die and rise for us.

What is coming is not angels and shepherds and sweet smelling hay. What is coming shakes heaven and earth.

So look up and raise your hands: Your redemption is drawing near.