

BRINGING DOWN THE HEAVENS

Preached by the Rev. Barbara E. Davis

November 29, 2009

The First Sunday of Advent

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

A few weeks ago, my almost three year old daughter went through a phase where whenever we were outside day or night, she would say with excitement, “Mommy, I think I see a shooting star! Do you see it?” The nighttime sightings were insistent; if I didn’t answer right away, her question would become more demanding, “Mommy, do you see it?” My view was usually obstructed by trees or buildings or doubt, so I often struggled to see what she saw. Admittedly I would sometimes encourage her, seeing the shooting star and affirming her vision. Sometimes I would ask questions of my own, “are you sure that’s a shooting star, or is that an airplane?” The daytime sighting were more complicated, and I found myself explaining, the way parents do, that we usually don’t see the stars and moon in the daytime, only to create more amazement in her young eyes when she would spot that beautiful morning moon, hanging high in the blue sky as we turned to go down into the subway stop.

Star-gazing runs in my family; it is a tradition my mother passed to me by repeatedly calling me away from homework or the television to come to the front porch and see the moon or the milky way, or the first star rising at twilight. In the farmlands where I grew up, the only light pollution was our mercury light – that’s a relative of a streetlight for you urban dwellers – that illuminated a patch of grass no bigger than this communion table. Needless to say, the skies I gazed at as a child were as bright and revealing as one could hope. I don’t remember ever looking for signs, but there were wonders aplenty, in all seasons. There is a feeling that emerges searching the sky for the big dipper or seeing the full moon on a crisp winter night that brings perspective to the worst days and cushions the soul with mystery.

It is no wonder that the Bible is full of imagery pointing us to the signs of nature revealed in the night skies and the transitions of the natural world. Whether the view is urban or rural, ancient or brand new, the experience of star-gazing invites a resonance with the mysteries of the divine.

The passage we heard this morning from Luke’s gospel begins our advent journey by inviting us to scan the day and nighttime skies; in fact, these verses sound a little more like a first century *Farmer’s Almanac* than a gospel account. If we are honest, we must confess we don’t quite know what to make of this description as the start to the advent season.

First of all, even though we may be loath to admit it, with the bells and whistles of Black Friday and Cyber-Monday sandwiching this morning’s service, we wouldn’t mind a little Christmas. Maybe just a story that seemed to be leading up to the Christmas story so we could be adequately impatient and be reminded of the importance of waiting and preparing spiritually during this season. Especially in Luke’s gospel, there are so many choices. Luke’s gospel not only provides us with one of the most memorable versions of Jesus birth, full of the traditions of the journey to Bethlehem by Mary and Joseph for the census, the inn being full, the child being

born in a stable, and the angels visiting the shepherds with glorious news, but Luke's gospel also packs the first chapter full of interesting and unique stories that set the stage for Jesus' birth.

The first chapter of Luke's gospel introduces us to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the angel Gabriel who brings them the unexpected news that they will be parents of the child who will become John the Baptist. Mary also receives a visit by the angel Gabriel and she then visits Elizabeth where she stays for several months while both women are pregnant. It is Luke's gospel that gives us the child jumping in Elizabeth's womb when Mary arrives with her news that she too is pregnant, and it is this first chapter that gives us the beautiful words of Mary we know as the Magnificat. The chapter concludes with Zechariah's prophecy that ends "by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:78-79, NRSV)

Any of those stories seem like better places to start than what the lectionary gives us today— a strange passage late in Jesus' ministry about star-gazing and fig trees. The readings for the first Sunday of Advent always surprise us with their apocalyptic predictions and cautions. Compared with similar readings in Matthew and Mark's gospels (see Matthew 24:29-36 and Mark 13:24-32), the gospel of Luke's rendering of this passage is a little softer, a little less alarming, a little more hopeful that the destruction will be isolated and escapable. As hearers of this word, however, we are left unsure about how to react; are we included with those who will faint from fear and foreboding, or are we to welcome this change?

It is in that point of pondering where our advent begins. The question of how we respond to change is the first step into Advent. Whether listening among the first century audience of the emerging gospel of Luke or among the twenty-first century reformed Christians living in New York City, all who hear this word are challenged to be aware of what is coming upon the world. The first century hearers of this word were trying to negotiate life in the Roman Empire. It was a life full of compromise for Luke's community; Luke's gospel articulates the balance in these difficult times by lifting up in one hand the voices of those seldom heard – the shepherds, the tax collectors, women and with the other hand offering cautionary advice about relating to the Empire. Luke's community is not in full revolutionary revolt against the Roman Empire, instead, Luke's gospel is trying to find language to help people live Jesus' radical message *within* the Empire. It is not an easy feat to undertake, and critics on both sides will constantly have fodder by criticizing what one is doing too much of or failing to do.

Questions of balance and compromise are not only first century questions though, are they? We have similar struggles today as we try to decide how to live the message of the gospel within the world we find ourselves in. How do we provide all that we want for our children and grandchildren?

How do we balance the increasing demand of workload and the time we need to be with our families more? How can we do more to help the homeless, the poor, the less fortunate? How do we give back to our community in a way that is meaningful? How do we divide our time between our aging parents, our jobs, and our children? The list can go on and on, and as Advent begins those decisions and compromises are pulling at our heartstrings, for we know how difficult it is to find the balance that is needed in this world.

I have recently been reading a collection of the plays of Tennessee Williams in which I came across a famous essay he wrote called “The Catastrophe of Success.” It was published in the New York Times just a few days before *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened on Broadway. In this essay, he discusses the difficulty he had adjusting the way his life changed after the success of *The Glass Menagerie* a few years earlier. Let me share a few short paragraphs from the beginning of the essay:

I was snatched out of virtual oblivion and thrust into sudden prominence, and from the precarious tenancy of furnished rooms about the country I was removed to a suite in a first-class Manhattan hotel. My experience was not unique. Success has often come that abruptly into the lives of Americans. The Cinderella story is our favorite national myth, the cornerstone of the film industry if not of the Democracy itself.

The sort of life that I had had previous to this popular success was one that required endurance, a life of clawing and scratching along a sheer surface and holding on tight with raw fingers to every inch of rock higher than the one caught hold of before, but it was a good life because it was the sort of life for which the human organism is created.¹

The image of the human organism being created to hang on every moment for dear life is not a terribly uplifting image, but the contrast Williams is making about achieving success is an important distinction for us to hear at the start of Advent. After all, the success of Advent is not a Cinderella story, but a journey of endurance that is full of surprises and mystery.

If we want to welcome a sea-change in our world, we have to let go of defining what it is to look like. We have to let go of controlling the compromises and minimizing the pain we will feel in the transition. Smothering the spark that ignites the change also prevents the fullness of the renewal from taking hold. If we insist on defining the change of Advent too tightly we will miss what is really possible when the kingdom of God draws near and the heavens are brought to earth. The theologian Laurence Hull Stookey is wise to remind us that “we love a God who keeps promises yet loves surprises.”²

The change and compromise Advent brings into our vision today is one full of the promise of surprise. Our task is to watch and listen and pay attention. But do not be surprised if this Advent is lived out differently than what we are expecting.

It is the poet Louise Gluck who captures the place we find ourselves on this first Sunday of Advent in her poem, “Before the Storm,” listen to her words as if they are describing this moment:

Rain tomorrow, but tonight the sky is clear, the stars shine.
Still, the rain’s coming,
maybe enough to drown the seeds.
There’s a wind from the sea pushing the clouds;
before you see them, you feel the wind.
Better look at the fields now,
see how they look before they’re flooded.

A full moon. Yesterday a sheep escaped into the woods,
and not just any sheep—the ram, the whole future.
If we see him again, we'll see his bones.

The grass shudders a little; maybe the wind passed through it.
And the new leaves of the olives shudder in the same way.
Mice in the fields. Where the fox hunts,
tomorrow there'll be blood in the grass.
But the storm—the storm will wash it away.

In one window, there's a boy sitting.
He's been sent to bed—too early,
in his opinion. So he sits at the window—

Everything is settled now.
Where you are now is where you'll sleep, where you'll wake up in the morning.
The mountain stands like a beacon, to remind the night that the earth exists,
that it mustn't be forgotten.

Above the sea, the clouds form as the wind rises,
dispersing them, giving them a sense of purpose.

Tomorrow the dawn won't come.
The sky won't go back to being the sky of day; it will go on as night,
except the stars will fade and vanish as the storm arrives,
lasting perhaps ten hours all together.
But the world as it was cannot return.

One by one, the lights of the village houses dim
and the mountain shines in the darkness with reflected light.

No sound. Only cats scuffling in doorways.
They smell the wind: time to make more cats.
Later, they prowl the streets, but the smell of the wind stalks them.
It's the same in the fields, confused by the smell of blood,
though for now only the wind rises; stars turn the field silver.

This far from the sea and still we know these signs.
The night is an open book.
But the world beyond the night remains a mystery.³

The storm of Advent is gathering around us, reminding us that the world as it was can never return. Our God is preparing to bring down the heavens. We can trust the promise of this mystery will renew us and surprise us yet again, if we don't hold on too tight.

¹ Williams, Tennessee, “The Catastrophe of Success” in the The Glass Menagerie (New Directions Books: 1999), p. 99-100.

² Stookey, Laurence Hull, Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN: 1996), p. 122.

³ Gluck, Louise, “Before the Storm” in A Village Life (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York: 2009), p. 10-11.