

29 November 2015 (First Sunday of Advent)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Signs of Wonder”
Luke 21:25-36

I marvel every year at this time at the lengths to which people go to recover a sense of wonder. My cynical side maintains that it’s all about retailers making money. But my spiritual side perceives a culture starved for surprise, the kind that delights children; the kind that offers something brand new that no one has ever seen or heard of before; the kind that, at least for a little while, can make us forget our weariness and our failure to deal with our various sources of frustration, and give us peace. How else shall we account for the stubborn persistence of decorations, gifts, scents, and images that conjure up a mythical era of country houses surrounded by drifts of snow, barns with hay, and carolers holding mugs of hot chocolate? The persistence of that vision suggests to me not only that it sells, but also that it captures our hearts at a deep level, and keeps on capturing them year after year. We’re all looking for something wonderful—that is, something that will evoke in us a sense of wonder so powerful, we could get lost in it and never want to come out. But where shall we find it? In a Hallmark movie? Disneyland? A peppermint mocha from Starbucks? What source is there for signs of wonder that will last longer than a movie, a mocha, a theme park, or a season? Where shall our longing for wonder be satisfied?

On this first Sunday of the church’s new year, the Gospel reading from Luke in which Jesus describes the natural world falling apart and people fainting from fear hardly seems a promising candidate to inspire wonder. Jesus certainly depicts a scenario that catches everyone by surprise. But wonder? This text doesn’t exactly capture our hearts, at least not in the way in which we would choose to have them satisfied. Why is this passage in the Gospels, not only in Luke, but also in Matthew and Mark? And why is it so important for our awareness of Jesus’ advent in our lives?

One important lesson I think we can draw from these words of Jesus is not as much the scary part about the natural world at odds with itself or the nations’ distress or people’s perplexity as to what is going on—we already know about that. The important lesson has to do with what it means. Jesus wants us to understand that at those very moments when there is the most chaos and terror, God’s fulfillment of the world’s redemption is at its most immediate. Jesus’ keen awareness of the world’s distress led him to an equally keen awareness of God’s power to heal beyond what we could imagine possible. He himself had been the instrument and incarnation of God’s power and grace, but he had also witnessed God’s power and grace working through his disciples, those unlikely instruments who, like us, were no more extraordinary than the distressed humanity around them. For Jesus, that meant that God was ready to display signs of wonder through the very people who were tempted to give up hope—a miracle of transformation that matched the very creation of the world. That is why we begin every first Sunday of the church’s new year with this text, because it reminds us of God’s answer in Christ to the world’s yearning and longing for wonder.

But there is another important lesson from this text, and it has to do with the fact that God doesn't accomplish the world's redemption through separate acts performed by a series of isolated individuals, but rather by forming humanity into a redemptive community. One of the few times in the Gospels when we find Jesus truly joyful is after the disciples have returned from their first mission trip with tales of wonder and healing—in Luke's Gospel, it's in Chapter 10. Why was Jesus so over the moon about that? Because it was then that he realized that the disciples had come together as a community and had grasped his message, that his Father had begun the work of fulfilling the kingdom foretold by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah through them, and that the Spirit was continuing to work wonders in the lives of those people whom the disciples had touched. The world's redemption was spreading, and it was happening through the world's alienated humanity coming together by the power and grace of God. The wonder was in the power of "we" accomplished by God's Spirit.

The first entry in our Advent devotional, written by Rachel Srubas, expresses the importance and power of "we" this way:

Advent is ours.
Neither you alone, nor I in isolation, wait.
We wait. For blessed hope, for revealed glory,
for God, who looked at humankind and said
we should not be alone, but together.
So we're in it together, this stretch of darkening days
that our Christian forebears called Advent.
It means "to come to," means "an arrival."

We have come to the winter of our faith.
We have arrived at the season of our stress.
What better time to practice prayerful presence
than this month of yearnings yet unrealized?
Blessed are we whose calendars crowd with obligations,
whose heads clog with colds, whose roads narrow,
snow-choked,
whose churches swell with uneasy seekers drawn
Christward;
the Savior has been who we are.
When he returns as he promised, he will surely find
us anxious.
Will he find us together?

Friends in Christ, the wonder we seek and for which we yearn lies in our collective watching and waiting, our vigilance and expectation of God's birth in our lives. Much of the vision that sells in our culture year after year with surprisingly little variation, actually has more to do with sentimentality than it does with true spirituality. When we are tired, weary, and frustrated, we seek solace in a Hallmark movie, or Disneyland, or maybe a peppermint mocha from Starbucks. But as sources for signs of

wonder, a movie, a mocha, or a theme park cannot deliver what our hearts yearn for. The wonder of Jesus is that he focused squarely without any distraction or diversion from the mission God had given him—and in pursuit of that mission Jesus never sentimentalized or cheapened humanity’s deepest longing. He was honest and loving at the same time, in the way that someone can tell us the truth but it doesn’t hurt, it simply feels right and it is a relief to hear it from someone who will walk with us through the natural world’s turmoil, the nations’ distress, and the perplexities of the people around us. The wonder is that through Christ’s redeeming love, God is present in us, and that God is still actively performing signs of wonder through us, in this season, and in all seasons. As we approach the Lord’s table on this first Sunday of Advent, we do celebrate the grace and power of God’s presence in Jesus Christ, for whom we wait together, in community, with heads held high in great expectation.



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