

A SEASON OF PROMISE
A Communion Meditation by Dr. J. Matthew Burton, Jr.
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(Luke 21:25-36 NRSV) "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. {26} People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. {27} Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. {28} Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." {29} Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; {30} as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. {31} So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. {32} Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. {33} Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. {34} "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, {35} like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. {36} Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

“How would the governments of our planet prepare six billion people for the end of the world? The answer, “They wouldn’t.” The Mayan calendar as interpreted by Hollywood tells us that the world will end in 2012. The movie **2012** doesn’t tell Christians anything they haven’t heard before. The first Sunday in Advent always starts out with apocalyptic words. We begin this season in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is speaking in the temple near the end of his life. He speaks of destruction and the end of time.

These were not strange words to the people in Jesus day. They were used to apocalyptic talk. Early Christians thought that the end would reach its climax with the reappearance or second coming of Jesus. Jesus records in Luke that the temple would be destroyed and that false Messiahs would appear. There would be war, earthquakes, famines, pestilence, and signs in the heavens, believers being tortured and betrayed. Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies and there would be many bloody battles. There would be signs in the sun, moon and stars. It’s enough to get anybody’s attention.

Interestingly these things have been going on for centuries. Supposedly, we live in a civilized time but there is still war, famine, pestilence, earthquakes and destruction. There are things in every generation that feel like the end of the world. When I was in Junior High, it was Russia and Nuclear warheads. One of my best friend's parents had a fully stocked bomb shelter in their basement. Many feared that Armageddon could happen at any time. Most recently, there were those who thought the world was ending in the midst of a financial meltdown. No wonder so many religious fanatics think the world is coming to an end. What are we to make of the signs and the Luke text for the first Sunday in Advent?

Is there any place for us to be safe? Where can we find comfort in troubling times? Is there a promise of anything better? Interestingly, if you look in the middle of our text there is a parable about a fig tree. In the middle of all the destruction and bad news there is a promise—the promise of summer after the winter storm. If there is going to be total destruction and devastation, wouldn't the tree be lifeless, leafless and weathering away like the tree in a storm?

The tree is green with life. The leaves are pushing forth. I believe this is Jesus way of saying, “*there is promise for the future.*” It isn't all about destruction and chaos. And even if you believe the world is falling apart, **which I don't**, God's reign is still coming. God is here and everywhere ready to hold us. God is ready to carry us into an unbelievable future with Him. Even when the world does its worst, there is always God's promise in our lives.

Jesus said, “. . . *this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*” Obviously the world did not end before that generation died away, so what was Jesus talking about, and why do we have to read it today, on this first Sunday in Advent? We read it because Jesus knew about pain and disruption in life. He knew about the sins our world would need to repent of.

Jerusalem, in so many ways, was no different from Monroe or Charlotte where rich and poor live radically different lives. There is conflict and crime around every corner. There is destruction and hate. Jesus knew what it was to see His most holy temple shrouded in hypocrisy as much as we know how it feels to see our most holy of seasons turned into a slick marketing ploy. We have our own apocalyptic moments every day. But even when oceans and rivers are flooding and nations disappear amidst death and destruction Jesus' words never pass away.

While reading the story of Astronaut Randolph Bresnik becoming a dad again while walking in space and making repairs on the space station, I happened to run across another interesting story. It is the story of Charles Sabine who was a war correspondent with NBC for 25 years. He covered hundreds of conflicts and disasters from Bosnia to Bagdad, from the Rwanda genocide to the Indian Ocean tsunamis. His reporting earned him an Emmy and several other prestigious awards during his career.

Four years ago, Sabine's life changed. He decided to get a genetic test that would tell him if he carried the gene for Huntington's disease—the disease that took his father's life and for which there is no cure. Sabine says that he has seen a lot of death, destruction and suffering throughout the world during his life but ***“nothing that I've experienced compares with that test in terms of the terror that it inflicted on me.”***

The test told Sabine, with cold certainty, that he had the gene for Huntington's and that he would likely die the same horrible death that his father died—the slow and painful death that his older brother was already experiencing. In the midst of the painful news, Sabine and his wife made the momentous decision to have a child. Sabrina is now 17 months old. They've nicknamed her ***“Breezy.”*** They had her tested and she does not have the gene for Huntington's disease. Sabine says that having ***“Breezy”*** has changed his life. ***“It's been such a lesson to me to see what having a child can do in terms of healing your own person. It***

really has been an extraordinary experience, even in the darkness of this terrible disease.”

Jesus’ word endures. Even in the midst of the worst the world can throw at us, Christ never goes away. Let us remember and celebrate His presence.