

Luke 21:25-36
Nov 29, 2009

South Plains

United States of America is unmatched. Just as important, the commitment and devotion of so many women and men who voluntarily serve our country in the military is a great strength. We have reason to give thanks this weekend.

“Standing Up”

When we moved to Charlottesville, my daughter told me I could get my hair cut at Staples just like Howie Long. He’s the football player who now sells Chevrollets on TV. I took this advice to heart because Howie Long has a perfect flattop. When I was twelve years old, I remember wanting my hair to look like that. I asked the barber in Crozet to give me a flattop. He did his part, but try as I might, I could not achieve the classic flattop. I remember looking in the mirror before school one day and shouting at my hair, “Stand up!”

Jesus tells his followers that there’s a time to “stand up and raise your heads,” not because you want to look good, but “because your redemption is drawing near.” The events that Jesus describes – distress and confusion, people fainting from fear – these are not events to inspire confidence. Yet, Jesus says this is the time to “stand up and raise your heads.” That’s a message for us in this distressing and fearful Advent 2009.

In one sense, of course, we live in a wonderful time, in a land blessed with both material things and profound values. The freedoms sought by European settlers more than 400 years ago have blossomed beyond their wildest dreams. The prosperity of the

Nevertheless, these are distressing times. We’ve been at war for eight years. There is no easy way out. The news last week estimates that 25% of American homes are upside-down, meaning that one out of every four homes is worth less today than the money owed for that house. “Upside-down and underwater” are words we hear too often in the craziness of this economy. We all thought that owning a home was not only the best, but the safest way to prepare for the future. Every year, little by little, our nest egg was supposed to grow larger and larger. But, in 2008 and much for 2009, time seemed to run backwards because investments were running backwards.

The season of Advent reminds us that just when the world seems upside-down and backwards, that’s the time when God is on the move. “Your redemption is drawing near.” The most hopeful prophecies that we will read in the coming weeks are words spoken in the midst of tragedy and discouragement. Jeremiah’s prophecy came at the low point of Israel’s history, during the Babylonian captivity. Jerusalem lay in ruins. The temple had been destroyed. The royal family and the leading citizens of Jerusalem, the people who might have provided leadership to rebuild after the war, these were

the people led into exile. All the promises the Lord had made to Israel were lost in the debris of defeat. And, both Isaiah and Jeremiah said that the people had brought disaster upon themselves by their disobedience. Nevertheless, the prophet proclaims, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah."

Such a prophecy was possible for only one reason, the integrity of the God of Israel. The people had forgotten about that integrity. They had failed to remember who they were dealing with as they worshiped in the temple. They had ignored the nature of the Lord whom they called upon to witness to their bargains in the marketplace. They had not listened carefully for a long time to the word of the Lord. And, thus they must have found these words of the prophet surprising. In the midst of their troubles, it was hard to believe that the Lord had not forgotten them.

That failure of faith can happen to any one of us. Our fondest dreams turn sour. Our plans go awry. We lose the people we thought would be there for us always. Discouragement settles into our bones like a bad cough that won't go away. And, we begin to think that nothing works out the way it should.

The same sort of hopelessness can settle in a society. Debby and I spent three wonderful days last week basking in the sunshine of southern California.

One morning we drove up Mt. Soledad where a memorial to our veterans overlooks San Diego. When I turned away from the Pacific Ocean and looked toward the mountains, I could see a brown haze hanging over the landscape. I'm told the air quality in southern California has improved thanks to pollution controls, but the smog still obscures the view, and people take it for granted. Our nation has a kind of smog hanging over our land, an emotional and spiritual smog that obscures the nature of the integrity of the God of Jeremiah, the God of Jesus, the God we worship.

Like atmospheric smog, our spiritual smog is a mixture of many things: A loss of jobs, a long war against an enemy we do not understand, changing values that have led to a sliding scale for standards of behavior, and all the accumulated worries and anxieties of life. The result is not really a loss of hope so much as a loss of energy for making the changes we know are needed. We take for granted the injustice of an economy where the rich get richer and the rest get less and less for their work, where lives are stifled for lack of healthcare, and where discrimination on the basis of wealth is either glossed over or else it's blessed by the invisible hand of the marketplace.

It is for such a time as this, the message of Advent says, "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." The nearness of God's kingdom has been revealed in the coming of Jesus. His coming reminds us that it is the nature of God first, to

remember his own; second, to bring justice to the earth; and third, to always keep his promise to be with us, even to the end. That's the integrity of the God we worship.

First, the Lord remembers his own. While Abraham was an immigrant, wandering across the Middle East, the Lord protected and guided him. When Abraham was tested and threatened by enemies, the Lord's hand blessed him. When he and Sarah were disheartened by the lack of a son and thought themselves beyond help, the Lord reassured them and helped them. Generations in Egyptian slavery, forty years in the wilderness, attacks by Philistines and exile in Babylonia – none of that caused the Lord to forget his own.

The Lord will not forget you and me. Advent gives us the gift of memory every year. There are memories of Christmases past, of loves enjoyed and celebrated again, and even bittersweet memories of loves lost but not forgotten. Most important are the memories renewed by the reading of scripture, stories of the surprising ways God remembers his own.

Second, the integrity of the one we worship is revealed in the justice he brings. Justice is not a value we celebrate much this time of the year. I suppose that's because the high holy days of Christianity emphasize grace that gives us so much more than we deserve, especially forgiveness for our sins in Christ. Yet, justice

keeps appearing in the Advent readings. Jeremiah proclaims that a branch of David will spring up “to execute justice and righteousness in the land (33:15).” The songs recorded in Luke's gospel celebrate the triumph of right over wrong.

We ignore justice at the peril of ignoring our very salvation. Despite the fact that Jesus did not lead an armed revolution against the Roman Empire, he did revolutionize the life of the Empire. He insisted that the commandments be kept, and he demanded a righteousness that exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees. He uncovered hypocrisy in religion. Far from easing the requirements of the law, he interpreted murder to include hatred and adultery to include lust. Why? Because justice and righteousness are the nature of the God of love.

Finally, the integrity of God means that God keeps his promises. Even when we do not keep our promises to God, the Lord keeps faith with us. The Messiah who came was not the Messiah people wanted or thought they needed, but God sent the Messiah anyway. The salvation they expected did not come with chariots and spears, but it did come with forgiveness. And, it spread far beyond the boundaries of the Empire, outlasting the Empire by millennia. Although it is a salvation of grace and love, it asks an obedience that often leads to suffering and sometimes death.

It's a way of life that would be outrageous except for the example of Jesus who leads the way. Because we walk that way with a God who remembers us, who brings justice, and who keeps promises, we can walk with our heads raised high.

Recently, public television carried a documentary about those African American children who walked into white Virginia schools for the first time in the 1950's. Virginia had adopted the doctrine of Massive Resistance, the effort to close schools rather than to allow African Americans to integrate public education. One of the little girls who first integrated a Virginia school was interviewed as an adult. She recalled the terror of walking between lines of white people throwing insults and sometimes rocks. She remembered her fear at seeing so many men in black uniforms with rifles, holding dogs on leashes. At any minute, she expected those dogs to be turned on her. Every day of school was a challenge. Looking back on those days, she said she was so proud to have been a part of that change in the world despite all the fears. The world was being turned upside-down. Yet, she stood up and raised her head because redemption was drawing near.

Each of us has our own challenges to face in a poor economy, a long war and world full of change. Stand up and raise your heads, your redemption is drawing near. Advent is here.