

"Human BEing"

A meditation based on Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13;

and Luke 21:25-36

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Redlands United Church of Christ

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I heard it again just the other day...a wise woman, member of this congregation, was commenting on the state of her busy life. With a fair amount of angst, she said, "I am a human BEing, not a human DOing..." Her words may ring truer and more clear than angels' songs this time of year. With holiday meals to prepare, family traditions to keep, presents to purchase or make, packages to wrap or deliver, parties for which to plan, and social events to attend...well, the anticipation itself can leave us sputtering, "Bah...humbug!"

Today's scripture passages offer a bit of an antidote to the holiday hustle, a balance of perspective to the "fa-la-la's" that can seem like an unwelcome Jack Frost nipping at our heels. Each one, in its own unique manner, speaks of living life differently, more peacefully, less stressfully, and in full awareness and appreciation of God's loving presence with us. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of God's way as being one of justice and righteousness...not of chaos and over-commitment. The psalmist invites us into the role of perpetual student, learning always of God's paths of love and faithfulness by being loving and faithful in our relationships...what a great idea for this holiday season! The Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians about practicing gratitude and love...another good idea for increasing our values rather than our credit limit this month! And then we have Luke, whose strange, larger-than-life images serve to urge us to pay attention to God all around us...

Rev. Kate Huey, who is on our national UCC staff and wrote some thoughts on the gospel passage for the UCC lectionary study, notes that, "While we set up Nativity scenes with a sweet baby Jesus lying in a manger, the grown-up, just-about-to-die Jesus is standing in the Temple, teaching about the coming catastrophe – the destruction of that Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. – which Luke of course knew about when he wrote his Gospel fifteen years later. But Jesus seems to be talking about even more than that: the end of all things, the end of time itself. It certainly puts those Christmas preparations in a different perspective."

Here we are, preparing for another set of beginnings, and here Jesus is, talking about the end. What we hear in Jesus is known as apocalyptic talk. It occurs in scripture whenever things are especially bad for a group of people who feel persecuted and inferior. The smaller they feel, the grander their language becomes to express their hope that things as they are will cease to be...that things as they are will shift, disappear even, to make way for better times. Through their large, dramatic terms, we hear their hope of freedom from whatever and whoever oppresses.

This sort of apocalyptic talk occurs earlier in the Bible in the book of Daniel and we see it again here couched in the words of Jesus. How else would God up-end the power of something as mighty as the empire of Rome than by doing big things in big ways, even bringing down the heavenly bodies from their courses? Dianne Bergant, one of the authors of *Preaching the New Lectionary*, reminds us that metaphorical images like the moon and stars falling out of the sky, portray "the end of one age and the birth of another. [This type of] Apocalyptic imagery frequently is employed in describing the entrance of God onto the stage of world history."

Recall that, in the first century, the sun was the symbol of Rome itself, while the moon and the stars represented the client kings of the Roman Empire clustered around it in

constellation. So Luke, in talking about these powers of the heavens being shaken, is using coded language to communicate that Rome will fall, Rome's oppressive power will not be the last word, that some other power—God's power—will surely replace it. William Herzog, writing in the *New Proclamation* commentary bluntly states, "It is not the end of the cosmos...but the shaking of the earthly principalities and powers that is referenced here [in Luke]..."

As usual, Barbara Brown Taylor gets to the heart of the matter, when she concentrates on that fig tree in her sermon entitled "Apocalyptic Figs" published in the book *Bread of Angels*. She notes that, perhaps the people following Jesus in the late first century "...have been focused on abstract things, like judgment or salvation, or on dramatic things, like earthquakes and plagues. By directing their attention to a sprouting tree, Jesus lets them know that they do not have to work so hard, that God is speaking to them in the most ordinary events of their lives." Be mindful, Taylor urges, be alert, "[n]ot so you will know when to grab your crash helmet and head for the basement, but so you will know when the kingdom is near. So you will not miss God when God [appears]."

I am reminded of Leo Tolstoy's short story, *Where Love Is, God Is*. In it Martin, a poor cobbler, dreams that Christ will come and visit him. Excited, he awakens the next morning and prepares a lovely tea setting, then sets about his work. Every so often, he looks up from his cobbler's bench, hoping beyond hope that his dream will come true. But there is no Christ at his window. As the day wears on, the cobbler invites one after another person in for tea. First his aging friend who is wearily trying to clear the snow from the walk, then a young woman with a baby freezing from the cold, and finally a woman and a boy who had an altercation about a stolen apple. To each, Martin offers the warmth of his wisdom flavored by the delightful tea. Though he is busy living the Gospel lessons about which he has read, and though he has shared with each visitor the essence of his hopeful dream, still the end of the

day is accompanied by sadness as Martin realizes his dream was just a dream. Martin prepares for bed, and opens his gospel book once more, remembers his dream, and, as Tolstoy writes,

"...no sooner had [Martin] thought of it than he seemed to hear footsteps, as though some one were moving behind him. Martin turned round, and it seemed to him as if people were standing in the dark corner, but he could not make out who they were. And a voice whispered in his ear: 'Martin, Martin, don't you know me?'

'Who is it?' muttered Martin.

'It is I,' said the voice. And out of the dark corner stepped [his aging friend], who smiled and vanishing like a cloud was seen no more.

'It is I,' said the voice again. And out of the darkness stepped the woman with the baby in her arms and the woman smiled and the baby laughed, and they too vanished.

'It is I,' said the voice once more. And the old woman and the boy with the apple stepped out and both smiled, and then they too vanished.

And Martin's soul grew glad. He crossed himself put on his spectacles, and began reading the Gospel just where it had opened; and at the top of the page he read, 'I was hungry, and you gave me food: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you welcomed me in.' And at the bottom of the page [Martin] read, 'Inasmuch as you did it to one of these my brothers or sisters, you did it to me...' And Martin understood that his dream had come true; and that Christ had really come to him that day, and he had welcomed Christ."

Advent is a season of preparation, yes, but our scriptures today invite us to see it equally as a season with substance itself...the substance of justice and righteousness, of practicing gratitude and love and faithfulness, of being mindful of God all around us. Advent, then, is not just about waiting for Christ, it is about wanting to be more Christ-like.

It is here that two of my favorite authors, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, are especially helpful. In their book, *The First Christmas*, they speak of Advent as “a season of repentant preparation,” but in a decidedly different sense than the usual Christian understanding of repentance as contrition, sorrow for our sins, confession, and doing penance. Borg and Crossan claim that repentance in the Bible “emphasizes change,” which means that when we repent we “turn to God” while also turning “away from the lords of this world.” Borg and Crossan challenge us to hear the political message in this passage from Luke, for “repentant preparation is also political.” According to them, whether one celebrates or criticizes the American Empire, it is still a reality, because “empire is about the use of superior power – military, political, and economic – to shape the world as the empire sees fit. In this sense,” they write, “we are the new Rome.”

But the end-time spoken of by Jesus in this passage from Luke, Borg and Crossan write, “is not about some mass immigration from a doomed world to a blessed heaven. Rather, it is about the end of this era of war and violence, injustice, and oppression. It is about the earth’s transformation, not about its devastation. It is about a world of justice and peace and our role in it. The Christmas stories,” conclude Borg and Crossan “are not about a spectacular series of miraculous events that happened in the past that we are to believe in for the sake of going to heaven. Rather, they are about God’s passion, God’s dream, for a transformed earth.”

So what meaning might we derive from these passages as we fa-la-la our way through this busy season? What hope might they hold out to us as we stand shadowed by the mountain of tasks to be completed? For starters, to those of us grieving a very present loss—loss of job or of family, of parent or of friend—these passages urge us to slow down and to notice the signs of peace and normalcy that are also part of our lives. A fig tree doing what fig trees do...growing. God doing what God does...bringing justice and righteousness to the land.

“Help me to be mindful of your mercy, O God,” implores the psalmist, “and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.”

Apparently these passages also urge us to do what we do very well, and what offers us a respite, a way station of peace...to be mindful of God’s love and mercy. That takes some effort. To see in the busyness, the mercy of God. To see in the chaos, the love of the Divine. To focus our attention and our energies, not on the busyness or on the chaos, but on how very much we—you and I—are loved by God who is from of old. The Radical Paul, the author of the first letter to the Thessalonians, suggests a predictably radical notion to heighten our mindfulness of God’s love: Paul’s own words of appreciation for the Thessalonian Christians as equally applied in our day. Gratitude expressed throughout this season—even for the small stuff, but especially for the larger, more dramatic gifts—such gratitude can keep you focused on the many ways that God is doing good even in your life right now.

In a word—a word used just the other day by one of our sage sisters in this congregation—this season that waits for no one, invites you to practice being yourself...human BEing in all your God-created potential! BEing, not DOing, is, after all, your given last name.

Amen and Blessed Be!

Benediction:

In the 5th century CE, Augustine wrote:

God without us will not; we without God cannot.