

Advent Comfort Food
Luke 21:25-36, 1 Thessalonians
First Presbyterian Church
December 2, 2018
First Advent Year C

Introduction

For many generations of American kids,
 “Now and Later” means candy...
little individually wrapped squares of taffy-like sweetness
 available in a variety of flavors from chocolate to banana,
 vanilla to green tingle berry.
The name was originally meant to suggest
 that some of the candy be eaten now
 and some saved for later...
 but whoever heard of a kid saving candy for later!
Another interpretation of the name suggests
 that the candy is hard and fruity
 when first taken from the store shelf,
 and soft and chewy after being carried around
 in the pocket of one’s jeans.
Either way, Now and Later candy stirs up a feeling of nostalgia...
 for some the fruity flavor and chewy texture
 almost becomes like comfort food from the past.
This morning’s passage from the Gospel of Luke
 focuses on both now and later...
 but we’re going to have to look hard
 for any comfort food in it.¹

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵“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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”
²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed

¹ From a sermon “Now and Later” by Rev. Fairfax Fair to Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, KY., December 3, 2006.

down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be 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.”

Sermon²

Fred Buechner tells being in Rome one year at Christmastime... and on Christmas Eve going to St. Peter's to see the Pope celebrate mass. Thousands of pilgrims from all over Europe were gathered – many having arrived hours early to get a good viewing spot in the church. Folks were elbowing their way as near as possible to the papal altar with its huge canopy of gilded bronze. Some had brought food to sustain them while they waited... occasionally singing would break out - O Come All Ye Faithful and Silent Night. Then finally, after several hours there was a sudden hush over the crowd... and way off in the flickering distance, Buechner spotted the Swiss Guard with the golden throne on their shoulders. The crowd cheered as the procession made its way forward through the church. Buechner remembers that while the Swiss Guard was dressed in Renaissance splendor of scarlet and gold, the pontiff himself was vested more simply – in the plainest white robe with only a white skullcap on his head. And as he was carried through the adoring crowd he leaned his narrow, ascetic face forward and peered into the faces with extraordinary intensity. He peered into Buechner's face and all the faces around him as if he was looking for someone in particular. His eyes seemed huge and exhausted with searching for someone he thought might be there that night. Was it this one? Or this one? Or was this the one?

In one sense, the face he was looking for was not hidden at all. The old Pope knew that the one he searched for was at that very moment crouched in some doorway against the night or tending to a sick patient in the hospital or rocking an orphan child to sleep. The old Pope surely knew that the one he was looking for was all around him there in St. Peter's... the face was visible, however dimly, in the faces of all who had gathered that night. For he knew that whenever you look beneath another's face to his deepest needs to be known and loved and healed, you have seen the Christ in him... you have seen the Christ in yourself. And if this is what the old Pope found as he was carried through the shadow and shimmer of his church, then he had found what he was looking for... he had found much. Yet, Fred Buechner also had the feeling that he was looking for more... that he was searching not only for the Christ in the men and women gathered in that room... but for Christ himself... the Lord himself... the one who promised that the son of man would come again in a cloud with power and great glory.”

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,” he said, “and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves... people will faint from fear and foreboding,” and then, at just such a time, we are to “look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

² This sermon draws from “The Hungering Dark” by Frederick Buechner (Seabury,1969), pp.113-125

And if you think that's intense, Jesus is downright tame compared to the words a generation later in the Book of Revelation: The Son of Man with face and hair as white as snow and eyes of fire... a two-edged sword issuing from his mouth. The last great battle with the armies of heaven arrayed in white linen and the beast thrown into the lake of fire so that the judgment can take place and the thousand years of peace. Then, the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband. And the New Testament ends, of course, with the words, "Come, Lord Jesus." Come again... come back now and do these mighty works.

What a way to begin our journey to the manger, eh? I mean, is there any part of our Christian faith that is stranger and more alien to our age than this doctrine of a second coming of Christ... this dream of Jesus and his HOLINESS coming back into THIS world where for centuries the only holiness has been glimpsed in the faces and actions of people like us? Of course, there is plenty good reason why this part of our faith is so foreign to us. The language itself is one – the images are strange... sometimes grotesque... and oftentimes violent. Another reason is the people – for the longest time we have associated the second coming of Christ with the "lunatic fringe" of Christianity – those folks who put on white robes and climb to the top of hills to wait for the end of the world. But I wonder if beneath all that – beneath the language these prophecies are written in and the kind of people who are most keen to see them come to pass... I wonder if what is most alien to us is the passionate **hopefulness**? We can say what we will about these apocalyptic visions – and believe me, folks have said plenty... but the bottom line is they look forward with HOPE to more than what we think is possible... to more than we are able to accomplish... they are unashamedly hopeful. It's not that we **aren't** hopeful... we have our hopes. Some of us had hopes for the recent election that if a certain candidate was elected things would change for the better... this time of year we hope we can be healthy and spend time with our loved ones... if we are very young, we hope for exciting things from Santa's well-equipped warehouse... we hope to be popular, or at least to have some friends to do stuff with... we hope to get into our first-choice college, or at least our second choice... we hope for peace, or at least that the worst of the killing will stop... we hope that though we are imperfect people, at least that we can overcome some of the temptations we do battle with. It's not that we aren't hopeful... it's just that we hope for what we consider to be reasonable to hope for... what we think is possible. Believe me, I know what I am talking about – if there was a continuum with pessimistic on one extreme and realistic in the middle and optimistic on the other extreme, I am somewhere to the pessimistic side of realistic. My hopes are prudent... reasonable... always tempered by political and social and economic and medical realities... always limited by human possibility... because by nature, I'm that guy who thinks hoping for more than is possible is nothing but a recipe for disappointment. And for people like me (and maybe you) ... this apocalyptic hope... this hope for what is more than possible is just TOO much... it's just TOO hopeful.

Which is why this first Sunday in Advent is always so good for me. Because you see, today Jesus reveals that life with God has a shape... that life under the providence of God is a story and this story is headed toward an end in God... everything is read from the end backwards... and this

end influences all that comes before. All that happens in the middle is finally defined by the end... which is to say that all that happens in our lives is finally defined by their end in God. Tom Long reminds us that one of the best Christian expressions of this is the old African American spiritual, "Nobody knows who I am until Judgment Day." In the middle of things, the forces of history may render a verdict on people. It may deem them to be chattel slaves, cannon fodder, or stubble for gas ovens. But history in the middle of things does not get to have the last word." God's eschatological fullness has the last word and that is the only truthfulness about who people really are. "Nobody knows who I am until Judgment Day."³ I don't know about you, but it's comforting for me to know the finished work of God even as we live each day in an unfinished world.

What will finally happen? When? How? The truth is we don't know... in fact, Jesus says we won't know. What we do know is that it matters whether you believe in a world without God... or a world with God. In a world without God we know that whatever happens will be a human thing... a thing no better than the best we can manage by ourselves. But, in a world with God, we can never know what will happen... just like the disciples couldn't know what would happen to their dead and buried Lord... we never know what might happen. And maybe that's the message from this strange passage for today... maybe that's what the second coming can mean for our time – can mean for our lives... that the thing that happens, whatever it is, is God's thing... and that is to say it is a new and unimaginable and holy thing that you and I could never pull off even in our wildest dreams.

I admit, it is a bit crazy to hope such a hope... to peer beyond the limited possibilities of human history to see the impossibilities of God. And apparently, Fred Buechner saw a little of that craziness in the old Pope's eyes that Christmas Eve night... eyes that Buechner was sure were hoping that Christ himself had come back that night... impossible as that may sound. He had not come back, of course. And as far as I know he has not come back yet. However, I do want to remind you that as we gather with one another around this table he is with us... and we experience a foretaste of that day that awaits us. Today we eat bread and remember Christ's past sacrifice... today we drink from the cup and look ahead to his coming in glory. We do not await his coming again in fear, but in faith... sitting up straight and tall to receive these gifts as signs of our redemption. We receive this sacrament NOW... as a sign of what will come LATER – to a time and place God wills... to a joy and peace beyond our imagining.

Charge:

This morning Jesus has told us that he is coming again... and though between now and then there will be difficult times, because it is HE who is coming we can stand up and raise our heads because redemption is drawing near. The END will be good because the END is in God... and in the meantime, you and I have work to do.

³ Thomas G. Long in *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (WJK, 2009), pg. 126-127

Until then, we are bound by faith not to be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch us unexpectedly there is too much work to do... too much watchful readiness to keep... there is a word for this (I love it)... the word is prolepsis – it means acting as if what you expect to happen has already happened. One more story – perhaps you have heard it. During the Colonial period of American history, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard. There was darkness in the middle of the day and in the midst of the panic a motion was made to adjourn... but one of the legislators stood up and said: “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. But if it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let candles be brought.”⁴ Perhaps the most eloquent expression of the hope of the second coming came from Martin Luther King, Jr.: I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.” I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.” Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly... and make it so.

⁴ Joanna Adams, Light the Candles, Christian Century, November 28, 2006, p.18