

I enjoyed a nostalgic evening driving to and from Slippery Rock for the football game on Friday since that was the route I used to take when I was in college. It was dark most of the way there and all of the way back, and the visibility wasn't great because of the snow, but I could still see both familiar landmarks and some new construction that has sprung up in the twenty-some years since I regularly traveled that way. It made me think of how some aspects of our lives are so completely different from those living in other periods of history, specifically those living in biblical times, but also how some scripture is so universally relevant it sounds like it could have been written yesterday. It is strangely reassuring to me to read Luke's gospel for today and hear that distress among the nations, confusion, and chaos are not recent additions to the human experience. Jesus' contemporaries thought the world was spinning off its axis every bit as much as people do today—and as much as those living through any of history's trying times have. Life on this planet is not for the faint of heart: wars, political strife, natural disasters, human-made disasters follow one right after another—if we're lucky; sometimes they overlap. So Jesus can truly say, *This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place* because every generation faces the dire consequences of living in this broken world—the same evils, injustices, and disasters repeated in the context of particular places and moments in time. *There is nothing new under the sun.*

In other passages Jesus cautions the disciples against dwelling on the timing of any given event, claiming that even he doesn't know the day or hour in which God is going to act. Here Jesus instead emphasizes the urgency and expectation with which his followers should await the coming of the kingdom of God. They are not to be caught unawares but are to be paying attention. When the leaves sprout on the trees we can tell that summer is just about here; it should be the same for the signs that the world is changing, but before changing for the better, things are going to get scary. Although this is the first day of the liturgical year and this is the first passage from Luke that we read this year, the 21st chapter places us in the story quite near the end of Jesus' life. If anyone is qualified to talk about how bad things can get on their way to getting better it is Jesus in the days leading up to the crucifixion.

Luke's Jesus tells the disciples to brace themselves for what is coming because Luke's gospel is revolutionary—and revolutions are chaotic. In just a few weeks we will

read in Luke the *Magnificat*, Mary's song rejoicing that God lifts up the lowly, scatters the proud, and brings down the powerful from their thrones. If you are Mary—a young, pregnant, unwed mother at the lowest of low points, that's great news; but it doesn't sound like good news if you're the one sitting on the throne. History is not exactly full to overflowing with gracious losers; the mighty and powerful do not go gently into that good night, and when their power and position are threatened, the next step often involves counting casualties. Disrupting the systems of this world—even the systems that absolutely need to be disrupted for the human community to live more fully into God's vision of justice and equity—disrupting those systems will result in chaos. But Jesus tells the disciples that the distress, confusion, and foreboding that come with change are signs that the kingdom of God is coming nearer. We are supposed to want the kingdom of God to be more fully revealed among us—otherwise we should stop praying all the time for the kingdom to come.

Jesus tells the disciples what they—what we—are to do in the face of these things happening: *stand up and raise your heads*. We are not to face the troubles of the world from a place of fear but with a spirit of courage and even anticipation. If God is bringing about redemption, for humanity and for the very earth itself, for the entire creation, then however slow and painstaking that movement may be, we look to the future with confidence because we know the one who holds that future is our good and gracious God. It is a little self-centered of us to say that the world is in worse shape now than it was 50 years ago or 500 years ago or 2000 years ago when Jesus spoke to his first followers. Nevertheless, the struggles that we face—in our immediate community, in our nation, in the geopolitical and natural world—are real and intense and not to be minimized. Yet they are not the end of the story. And, thank heavens, our confidence in what happens next does not come from the faith we have in ourselves and in our own abilities to fix the messes we've made. We stand up and raise our heads so that we can see *God* at work, redeeming what we have broken.

Advent is the season of watching and waiting—symbolized by the dark blue that mimics the pre-dawn sky. If we are so weighed down by fear and frustration at the world around us that our heads are bent in sorrow, that we're not looking to the horizon, then we'll miss the sun rising, bringing the warmth and light that this world, in the cold, dark depths of winter, so desperately needs. So no matter what chaos is swirling around us, we do not despair; we stand up and raise our heads: our redemption is drawing near.