

“Molded for Hope”
Advent I, November 27, 2011
Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Jesus’ description of coming attractions isn’t very encouraging. “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken....” Not the forecast you want to hear on the evening news. And maybe not the one his listeners wanted to hear either. Then again, it might be that Jesus wasn’t so much describing something to come so much as something that was. For many of the first readers of this Gospel, around 70 AD, it may have felt like things were coming to an end.

70 AD was the year Jerusalem was sacked by Rome. And even though this Gospel may not have originated in Jerusalem, Jewish and Jewish followers of Jesus would have been aware of it and affected by it. The destruction of the temple would have had an impact on all of them. It might even have felt as if the stars were falling from heaven itself. And with words like these from Jesus echoing in their collective memories, these new Christians may have seen it as a sign of his return. So even though they were surely oppressed by it, it might also have filled them with hope.

Where else does hope come from for people who have no control of their circumstances? People in Egypt are back in Tahrir Square today protesting what’s happening with their government. They continue to hope that their voices will prevail over an entrenched military that refuses to give up control. But I can’t help but wonder how the Christians of Egypt are faring through all of this. It’s not been easy for Christians in that part of the world for a long time, and with all the changes in the various governments it’s possible things will get harder for them. Nearly all the Christians of Iraq have been driven out or fled since the fall of Saddam Hussein. And there are Christians in nearly every other country in the region. How do they hold on to hope?

Are they like the people of Israel through Isaiah shaking a fist at God, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...” Come down and make things right again. Make life possible again. The people of Israel were feeling desperate and forgotten and guilty. They knew they had fallen: “We have all become like one who is unclean.” They had no reason to expect that God would listen to their cries, no reason to hope.

It seems like hope is the only weapon left for the powerless. The Christians in Egypt can’t really count on the culture to offer them justice anymore than the wider population can count on the military. When people are beaten down, when they live with unrelenting fear and oppression, hope is the only thing left to give them life. I heard a woman on the radio the other day describing her uncle in Greece who is 81 years old. As a boy he was there when first the Italians and then the Germans occupied the country. Life was unimaginably hard for them. His niece asked him how he got through it. He said, “Hope dies last.” They kept clinging to it, looking for some sign on the horizon.

How does that happen? Why do we keep looking when all the evidence is to the contrary? “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are the all the work of your hand.” God has fashioned us, molded us, for hope.

Because we are God’s own, despair does not overwhelm us. God has molded us to bend toward the horizon and look beyond what we see to God’s promised future. That’s the final word Isaiah has for the people of Israel who are wallowing in their despair. His words lift their eyes to the horizon. Out of the ashes of their desolation they’re given a new vision: “For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth, the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”

And when Jesus tells his followers to keep awake, it’s not to avoid calamity. He tells them to be aware of the new day dawning around them. The lesson of the fig tree is the lesson of new life springing forth. When they see destruction around them, they’re to look beyond what they see to the new creation about to unfold.

And for us, as we see governments being protested and violence descending, are we left just to wring our hands in despair, powerless to do anything? Or can we point to signs of hope on the horizon? Can we even become signs of hope for others? If God has molded us for hope, if that’s truly what it means to be God’s own, then our actions in the world should seek to lift others from despair. As we say in our prayer at communion: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. That’s the gospel we’re called to proclaim. Through acts of justice and compassion we point to the presence of Christ even in circumstances that deny it.

This time of waiting we call Advent is not meant to be passive. This is a time when all our efforts are to lean toward the presence of Christ already among us. That’s why we begin at this table. We begin our journey through Advent at the place where Christ’s presence is most clearly revealed. At this table amid all the difficulties we might endure in our own lives, the struggles we have within ourselves or with one another, that leave us in despair; or amid all the news of economic or political turmoil in the world, the realities of poverty in our communities and violence in our streets; amid all that, at this table we lift our eyes to the horizon of God’s promised future. We lift our eyes and remember we are molded for hope.

Amen