

“Just Beyond” – Luke 21: 25-36

Three Sundays ago, we gave Bibles to three boys in our Sunday school. Dillan, Lucas and Finley took their Bibles out of a gift bag only to discover that they were wrapped in newspaper. The newspaper symbolized good news. I joked at the time that the newspaper doesn't contain much good news, but the Bible does. The good news is God's faithfulness throughout the generations and the good news found in Jesus' message of love, forgiveness, grace and acceptance.

I thought about that as I was reflecting on today's scripture reading because in reading this passage one can easily wonder: *Where is the good news? Where's the hope, the joy, the promise we associate with preparing for Christmas?*

Apocalyptic literature, which is what today's passage is, is not known for good news. It's doom and gloom doesn't contain much joy, and today's passage is not even the most negative. The earlier verses in Luke 21 are far worse, talking about earthquakes, famines, plagues and destruction. It is so bad, the disciples ask, *when will this be?*

One answer is or could be, all the time, because the truth is we are living amid earthquakes, devastating fires and other kinds of destruction including famines and plagues. Those related to climate change are happening more often. The rise in terrorism is another form of destruction. So, too, is fear-mongering, hate speech and the reemergence of anti-Semitism. The desire of some to flame the debate, by encouraging fear and distrust of others is another example. Indeed, the list of destruction and devastation is long.

If one takes an honest look at the world there is no denying these are certainly difficult and trying times and, depending on who you are, scary and unsettling times. Some would say it is difficult to look for and hold out hope, but as people of faith, that is what we are called to do.

The question becomes, *in whom do we place our hope? Whom do we trust?* Today's scripture offers us an answer: God, the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of life. In the Parable of the Fig Tree, we are reminded that God remains consistently present and active in creation. Because God has not given up on creation or humanity, God continues to break into the world often unexpectedly. To see it, we must be willing to look beyond what is right now.

Emmanuel, God with us, is what we are to be preparing for, which is why today's reading contains these words: *Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. (v.34,35)*

The message is clear. Our role in all of this is to continue to hold out hope, to actively look for God's presence in the world. But our responsibility does not stop there. We are also called to be God's presence in the world, recognizing that we cannot be that presence unless we are looking for God's kin-dom to break into the world.

Looking for God's kin-dom as it breaks into the world does not mean we are to deny the realities of life, including the bad news around us. Holding onto God's hope is not a call to be naïve or Pollyannaish. We are not to bury our heads and pretend all is golden. We are to confront the injustice and destruction as we are able, but we do this trusting in God's redeeming love. We do this relying not on our sense of right and wrong, not on our personal agendas and beliefs, but

on God's call for justice. Justice, not for some, but for all, believing God is an active part of our actions.

God offers us glimpses of God's kin-dom all the time. To recognize them we must stay alert and be watchful. We also need to tell others about it when we recognize it, which reminds me of a story.

I serve on a Committee that helps shepherd potential clergy through the process of discernment and ordination. A couple of years ago I was sitting in a meeting, and there was this one candidate before us who was telling her story. She had been very successful in another career but felt called to ministry. Her calling resulted in her marriage ending and she was now a single mom in seminary. It was a difficult time for her. She was a full-time student commuting to school and serving a small challenging congregation while moving through the ordination process which is filled with all kinds of obstacles and requirements. One of the questions she was asked was, 'Where do you see the presence of God in all you are doing?' She responded, 'Everywhere, and at the most unusual of times and places, often when I least expect it.' The follow up question was, 'Name a time and place.' She told the following story:

One morning after dropping her children at school, she stopped for a cup of coffee before driving to her CPE assignment at a near-by hospital. It had been a particularly tough week with many commitments and conflicts. It was a dark, gloomy, drizzly morning, and while waiting in line at Dunkin' Donuts she was reflecting on how tired, stressed and worried she was. She was inching forward in line only to stop and find herself face to face with a dumpster that was opened with the garbage overflowing. She thought, 'that pretty much sums up how I am feeling.' Suddenly for some reason she looked just beyond the dumpster and saw the sun rising, a hint of a rainbow, and an older woman feeding some birds on a hill. In that moment, her spirits were lifted and she thought, 'Thank you God. Thank you for reminding me to look beyond the dumpster.'

Recently during another meeting of this Committee, this same person was lamenting because her process was not going as smoothly as she had hoped. I reminded her of the story she had told a few years earlier. She nodded, smiled and said, 'Yeah! Still true.'

It would not be a stretch to say that the lives of many to whom Jesus' ministered and proclaimed God's love looked like a dumpster, maybe even a dumpster fire. Poverty, despair, powerlessness was what they knew. They came to Jesus, in part because he gave them hope.

Some would say that for all the reasons I mentioned earlier, our world is like a dumpster or dumpster fire. This is especially true for those who are marginalized, oppressed and defeated, to say nothing of those dealing with illness, loss, death and grief. But that would not be the whole story. There is also the hope of God's promise, that can lead to joy. There are people with dreams, aspirations and ideals that inspire, so there is much for which to be thankful. There is also the promise that what is, will not always be.

To see this, my friends, we must look just beyond that which leads to foreboding. And, if we can't, we must let those who love us see it for us. In the same way, if someone we know, and love can't see it, we must stand with them, and see it, and believe it for them. We need to see it until they can. For when we do, God's kin-dom is both here and just beyond. So, be on guard, be alert, watch, for we know not the day or hour. Amen.