

“Fresh Air and Perspective” a sermon for Advent 1, based on Luke 21: 25-36, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on Sunday 28 November 2021

“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.”

It sounds like the writer might have experienced this. Maybe a volcano erupted and hot ash exploded into the sky and lava ran down to the sea and there was an earthquake followed by a tsunami and the sea roared and the waves rode up the beaches. People who had experienced a tsunami in the Solomons still shook in telling the story months later, of the sea washing up the beach into the church where people had gathered, carrying some worshippers away. Luke paints from inside the cataclysm, the crashing and unsettling, the once steady stars now unsteady, the once dependable sun now uncertain, the once shining moon now dark, the once solid earth now fluid, the once regular seasons now irregular. This is not a dispassionate meteorological seismic or astronomical account. Luke paints from inside the storm, whatever our storm is.

And he paints another, entering the storm, one who comes from beyond the horizon, who rides the clouds, who enters the darkness, who risks all the threats, who does not close his ears to the thunder or shut his eyes to the devastation or build a bunker to withstand danger or remove himself in any way from all the harm. This Jesus knows the storm from the inside, not avoiding or escaping or pretending or minimising. This Jesus enters into the sound and the colour and the drama and the scariness of the storm.

In Opononi there is a theatre that brings to life Maori creation stories. You sit there in contentment and safety while pictures play across a screen, and two people dramatise a story, including of the octopus emerging from under the rock, and then through those special effects some theatres now have, you feel the moist of the mist on your face and then you feel tentacles touching your ankles ... tentacles that are actually small threads playing under your seat ... you no longer feel safe and contented and you want to run, run, run ... Luke takes us there, with poetry that scares. Diana Butler Bass says that Advent slaps us with the uncertainty and violence of human history. From the beginning we're told there will be natural signs of turmoil and political distress. Chaos will hover over the earth, seemingly inescapable. Fear and dread will lead people to faint and some will feel as though the very foundations of heaven have been shaken by these world events.

We are in the storm. And on this first Sunday of Advent we are being prepared to receive a child of the storm, a child born in the storm, a child who will die in the storm. The Christmas story takes us straight into the storm. What posture do we take

then, in the storm? “Stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near.” Not bunker down. Not find a rabbit hole. Not ignore or pretend. Stand up and raise your heads ...

When the chaos and gloom and doom feels thick all around us, we can stand up for “fresh air” and gain perspective. How do you do that? The former Prime Minister of Australia Paul Keating would listen to opera music before big interviews or budget presentations. He said it helped him clear his head. Amid the rush of Christmas, Knox and Holy Name and All Saints churches offer a week of daily prayer, taking time during the day to pause and sit quietly. Or perhaps you are displaying a nativity set or putting up a Christmas tree or lighting a candle, and you take time to pause and pray. To enter into the eye of the storm, where calm is, where the centre is, where you are present to God as God is present to you.

Then Jesus turns us to a fig tree. We raise up our eyes from the chaos, and look at the fig tree, or whatever tree you notice. In our front lawn is a massive elm tree and living beside it we cannot but notice the seasons. Now it is lush with growth, soon I will be raking the leaves. Even in the chaos, there are things around us that are true and trustworthy.

Jesus uses the parable of the fig tree to describe how we encounter bad events, and that with each season, a different stage of existence and experience affects us, as happens to the tree. The changes of the tree help us understand how time moves forward, building on growth through the seasons and storms of our lives, adding one ring to another. At every step of the way, we can trust that the kingdom of God is near. When we see the signs of things changing, Jesus says, even then we can know that the reign of God is close. Even if everything else we built our life upon, what gave our lives structure, even when our ideas of God pass away, the reign of God is close. And the chaos, the uncertainty, the threat, the fear is the raw material of hope – it feeds our longing for the ultimate, the eternal, the enduring, the dependable. We watch longingly for glimpses of good, of eternity breaking in.

Then, says, Jesus, as we have breathed fresh air and gained perspective, we can take account of the storm within, perhaps the biggest challenge of all ... to guard our hearts against the traps and ruts we easily get stuck in when we try to cope and survive on our own. We are to live God’s freedom that stops us circling back to instinctive unhelpful reactions that stifle healthy relationships. Jesus wants to save us from ourselves. Be alert, praying for the strength to withstand these challenges so that, in the end, we *will* escape them ... to come to see that we are standing right now in front of or with the one who keeps setting us free, the Son of Man. Jesus is speaking of much more than the future. He is speaking of now.

Neal Plantinga has pointed out, being overwhelmed causes a number of different responses within ourselves and among us—especially as we wait for things to change. Some people succumb to sloth, others to cynicism, some try to control life, while others numb out the pain in whatever way they can. Jesus’ words here in Luke 21 are an “antidote” to all of these. The one who is, who was, and who is to come *is* our redemption drawing near, the kingdom of God that is near already, and the Son of Man whom we stand before. We are not left to the chaos and our own devices. God has come and is present now, yet always on the move.

This is the Advent life. To *stand up* and *raise* our heads as chaos looms; redemption is near, in the form of the Son of Man being present with us in the chaos ... to *look* at the fig tree and take stock of what we know is true and trustworthy, the reign of God is near ... to be on *guard* and *alert* through prayer to withstand the traps of despair and fear as we live in the presence of God. This is the Advent life, waiting for the child who will be born in the storm, who comes to us in our storm.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



Knox Church

449 George Street

Dunedin

New Zealand

Ph. (03) 477 0229

www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542 minister@knoxchurch.net