

Sermon for Sunday, November 28, 2021 - "Jarring Hope"

First Sunday of Advent
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus, our hope.

The sounds and images in today's reading would be jarring anytime. They seem especially out of place during the "holiday season" when we're longing for comfort and joy. We don't expect to be confronted with distress among nations, roaring seas, or people fainting with fear and foreboding. Well, not in church at least. We get enough of that stuff on the news and social media. Can't church be tender and peaceful, especially right now?

We'll get there. We'll get tidings of comfort and joy soon. We'll get to the story of baby Jesus coming to make God's love known. Yet even that story is not just tender and sweet. It's a story that should be quite jarring, especially to those of us who are comfortable and privileged.

God's messenger tells a young, unwed mother that she will give birth to God's child. This child, Jesus, is born to poor migrants who have to seek shelter in a barn. King Herod gets word that a child has been born who is to be king of the Jews, and he is threatened. So, he orders the killing of all babies under age two. Jesus' family must flee to Egypt and seek asylum there.

Jesus grows up poor under the oppressive Roman Empire. In his teaching and ministry he rebukes the wealthy and the powerful, yet he persists in showing God's love to all people, even Rome's tax collectors and soldiers. This radical love threatens those in power. They try to stop Jesus from healing, teaching and loving by putting him to death. But Jesus cannot be stopped. God raises him from the dead. Love prevails. New life arises.

Jesus lives and he comes to us again and again to make God's love known. Jesus also promises to come finally, at the end of time, to redeem the whole cosmos, to make all things new. This is great good news; it brings such comfort and joy! Yet this good news also challenges the status quo and shakes things up in the heavens and the earth. It wreaks havoc with the powers that be - the forces of evil, oppression, hatred and greed within and around us. It exposes the lies, the fake news, the half-truths of this world in order that the truth and the power of God's love for all people may be made known.

The good news of Jesus isn't just tender and sweet. It brings turmoil within and around us as all that opposes God is confronted. So, it seems preparing for Christmas also means preparing for some turmoil, and not just the kind that comes from family gatherings. Contrary to what we often hear these days, Christian faith doesn't protect us from turmoil. Jesus doesn't keep us safe amidst trials and tribulations. Instead, he gives us a way of being, a stance to take so that we can face whatever comes with hope and courage, rather than fear and foreboding.

Jesus says, "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Stand up, raise your heads. Remain grounded in a deeper truth and look to God. Don't be overcome by

drunkenness or worries, but lift up your head and pay attention to God's saving presence that is so near to you.

It seems Jesus wants us to avoid two ditches in responding to turmoil. Trying to ignore and avoid it all; or being overcome by it all. He cautions us to avoid drunkenness and squandering our energy with frivolous living - escapism and false comforts that seek to ignore the realities of the world. Apparently, binging on TV shows and junk food is not the answer. Seeking a peaceful, idyllic holiday while avoiding those who are poor is not the answer. Jesus's radical love for each of us and for the whole world makes a claim on us. We are to love as he loved, and pay special concern to the poor, the outcast and the stranger as he did. We are to seek the comfort and joy of others, not just ourselves.

Yet Jesus also cautions us about getting overwhelmed by worries and foreboding about the state of the world and all the needs around us. This is a very real possibility in these days. Sometimes we do need to turn off the news to tend to our well-being. We need to experience comfort and joy ourselves even as we seek it for others. We need to ground ourselves in the deeper truth of God's promises: Love has come, love has won, love will ultimately prevail.

We also need to lift up our heads and pay attention to signs of God at work - glimpses of love happening all around us and through us. And, oh my Good Shepherd, is love happening around us and through us. God is at work through this congregation in powerful ways.

Beloved, we can stand fast and lift up our heads, because we are not alone as we face the turmoil of this world.

Jesus endured it, even unto death.

Jesus rose again and is with us now in his word, in his body and blood, in his body the church.

Jesus is with us in all that we face loving, forgiving, healing and empowering us to do the same.

May this good news bring you real comfort and joy today and always.

Let's take a moment for a silent prayer.

One day, Jesus will come again to make all things new.

May this good news bring you real comfort and joy today and always.

Let's take a moment for a silent prayer.