

November 30, 2014
First Christian Church, Greensboro
Lee Hull Moses

First Sunday of Advent
Psalm 80, Isaiah 64, Mark 13
Tear Open the Heavens

Tear open the heavens and come down. Restore us, O God, make your face shine that we might be saved. Keep awake, for we do not know the day or the hour...

As always, it seems, we arrive at the first Sunday of Advent, fresh from the Thanksgiving feast, ready to plunge headlong into Christmas. We're ready for a baby in a manger, or at least some angels singing, and we hear instead the doom and gloom for Mark's apocalypse, the lament of the Psalms, the cry of the prophet.... We've waited long enough, haven't we? We've been walking past those Christmas decorations in the store for a month now, and Thanksgiving is finally behind us, couldn't we just sing a little Silent Night and get right to the good stuff? We've waited long enough.

But then there is the Psalm and the prophet and the gospel writer with talk of nations trembling and mountains quaking and the Son of Man coming in clouds, and it all starts to sound like the preacher on the street corner with a cardboard sign, proclaiming that the end is near.

The end is near.

Is it? Is the end near?

I was eavesdropping on a conversation in a coffee shop yesterday morning. A man who had been reading the newspaper in the corner got up to refill his coffee and passed by a woman he seemed to know. They said hello to each other, and he said, "I've been reading about the trouble in the middle east, how people are killing each other."

They talked for a minute about the ills of the world, how hopeless and never ending it all seems.

I could have added to the list:
wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that seem to never end.
climate change that's bringing wild weather and drastically changing our planet
the situation in Ferguson, Missouri, which at the very least, reveals that the racial wounds in this country are deep and not yet healed.

I thought of that heartbreaking picture of police in riot gear standing ready under a season's greeting sign..

Or the friend of a friend who lost her college-age son last weekend in a terrible accident.

Or the mother who is dying of cancer more quickly than she could have anticipated, who worries how her family will get along without her.

I thought of all the ways the world is crashing down around us.

Tear open the heavens and come down now, O God. We can't wait any longer.

The woman at the coffee shop agreed that it was all pretty terrible, and said, "There is a basic problem with human beings..." — but then she got interrupted and didn't finish her thought.

"What?" I thought — *What is the basic problem with human beings? Why can't we stop living this way?*

But the conversation shifted in another direction and they started talking about how they'd spent the holiday, tales of faraway family in for the week, too much food and divvying up leftovers. And the man told a lovely story about his family doing a dance together, traditional for his heritage, and he did a little dance step right there in the coffee shop to demonstrate, and he said, while his family was dancing all around him, he lost his balance for a minute, and he said, "I was falling, but the dance kept going on around me, and they held me up."

So I never figured out what she thought the basic problem with human beings is.

But later I thought of that quote from Frederick Beuchner, who says, "Here is the world; terrible and beautiful things will happen. Do not be afraid."

And then I thought, maybe the basic problem with human beings is, simply, perhaps, that we are human beings. Created always in the image of God, but so often falling so far short of what God imagines we can be. Maybe the basic problem with human beings is that life is filled with terrible and beautiful things — tragedy and violence and holiday feasts and family dancing.

Tear open the heavens and come down, O God. We can't wait any longer.

Because, see, this life, this life with all its terrible and beautiful things, all its pain and dancing.... this life is the life that God entered into, was born into, walked through, died in....

The man and woman in the coffee shop were quiet for a minute, and they sighed, almost in unison. "We just have to hang on to hope, I guess," the man said.

"And feed the birds," she said. "That's all I can do anymore, is feed the birds."

Martin Luther (the story goes) was once asked what he would do if he found out the world was ending tomorrow. "I'd plant a tree," he said. "I'd plant a tree."

Restore us, O God, let your face shine that we might be saved.

Jan Richardson - a writer and artist - wrote a poem she called "Blessing for When the World is Ending."

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun
the knife
the fist.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the slammed door
the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone
the television
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.

It has not come

to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you
will not mend you
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

<http://adventdoor.com/2014/11/23/advent-1-blessing-when-the-world-is-ending/#sthash.dluf351P.dpuf>

Those dark and foreboding words of scripture we read together this morning... are they about the end?
The prophet and the Psalmist and the gospel writer: are they proclaiming the end is near?

Or could it be that they are naming a new beginning?

See, today, is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new season. The beginning of the church year, actually, as we begin the story again, the story that we tell all year, over and over again, the story of how God comes into this awful, terrible, joyful, painful life and walks among us...

Maybe this is the beginning. Maybe the beginning is near.

Jan Richardson says - before writing that poem - that “Every year, Advent calls us to practice the apocalypse: to look for the presence of Christ who enters into our every loss, who comes to us in the midst of devastation, who gathers us up when our world has shattered...”
(<http://adventdoor.com/2014/11/23/advent-1-blessing-when-the-world-is-ending/#sthash.dluf351P.dpuf>)

I’ve been chewing on that phrase all week: “Advent calls us to practice the apocalypse.” What does that look like, to practice the apocalypse? To look for Jesus who shows up, and not just as a sweet baby on Christmas Eve but also in the terrible pain and injustice and terror of the world.

Maybe practicing the apocalypse means to look for beginnings instead of endings.

Stay awake, for you do not know when the time will come.

Scott Bonner is the director of the small public library in Ferguson, Missouri, which is just a block or two away from the heart of the protests and unrest happening there this week. The day after the grand jury decision was announced - the decision not to indict the police officer who killed Michael Brown last August - all the schools in the area were closed. But Scott Bonner kept the library open.

He did the same thing last August, when schools were closed for several days after the shooting happened — the library stayed open and held impromptu classes for kids who needed a place to be. Not just that, but the library provided:

- healing kits for kids, which include books about dealing with trauma, and a stuffed animal the kids can keep
- meeting space for small businesses who were applying for emergency loans.
- a safe and quiet refuge from the loud and violent streets outside.

The world caught wind of what was going on at the library in Ferguson, and people started sending donations: \$5, \$10, nothing big, but it added up, and so far this week, the library has raised \$175,000 from people who heard what was happening there. People who were just looking for a little light in the darkness.

From people who were practicing apocalypse —looking for beginnings when the world was ending around them.

Bonner says he wants to use that money to hire another staff person to focus on community programs for children, do upgrades for the library, continue to be a presence for healing and peace in a community that desperately needs it.

(<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/11/27/366811650/a-nationwide-outpouring-of-support-for-tiny-ferguson-library>)

The man in the coffee shop did a little dance, right in the middle of the shop, and said, “I was falling, but the dance kept going on around me, and they held me up.”

Maybe what we need is Advent. Maybe we need the urgency of waiting we find in these weeks of darkness, these weeks of waiting and watching. We need to practice the apocalypse, to look for Christ right in the thick of things, to look for beginnings in the midst of endings.

People of God, the beginning is near. There is light in the darkness and hope in the night, and this feast at the communion table calls us to celebrate, to rejoice, to give thanks, for the God who enters into our lives and brings us back to life. So come, let us come to the table and share in the feast. Amen.