

Stand Up and Raise Your Heads

Luke 21:25-36

Ute Molitor; First Congregational Church in Camden UCC; December 2, 2018; Communion Sunday

²⁵“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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” ²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Fred Craddock, a United Methodist professor and pastor, was invited to give two weekend lectures at the University of Winnipeg in Canada in the middle of October. The Friday night lecture went well but it was beginning to snow when people were leaving. Craddock tried not to worry since his university contact had explicitly written to him saying: “It’s too early for the cold weather, but you might want to bring a little windbreaker, a light jacket, you know.”

When Craddock got up the next morning, there were several feet of snow pressing against his motel room door. The phone rang. It was his host who proceeded to say: “We’re all surprised by this. In fact, I can’t come and take you to breakfast. The lecture this morning has been cancelled and the airport is closed. If you can make your way down the block and around the corner, you’ll see a little bus depot. There is a café inside that will hopefully be open. I’m so sorry.” “I’ll get around,” Craddock replied. He put on his light jacket although he knew it would be useless against the howling wind. The he picked up his baseball cap and put it on his balding head. It was so cold in the motel room that he knew that the hat would not be of much help either outside. So he grabbed a bunch of toilet paper and made a little nest of warmth inside his cap.

Scarcely armed against the harsh weather, Craddock put all his weight against the door and pushed his way into the cold. He started to shiver almost immediately as he braced against the merciless wind. The snow was deep and hard to walk through, especially with his thin dress shoes. Craddock slipped and stumbled until he finally rounded the corner to the one place in the vicinity that promised some warmth and sustenance. The bus depot café was packed with stranded people— all strangers connected by a common need. Almost every table was filled and the noise level was very high.

When he finally found a place to sit, it took quite a while until a man wearing a greasy apron came over and asked: “What will you have?” Craddock decided to start with the basics and asked for a menu. The owner who was doubling as waiter replied rather sharply: “What do you want with a menu? We have soup!” So Craddock asked politely: “What kind of soup?” The stressed man said: “Soup? You want soup?” Craddock began to realize that he was going nowhere fast and replied: “That was exactly what I was going to order: soup!” When the soup finally arrived, he became more disheartened. He put his spoon into the gray looking mush. It was awful. Craddock put his spoon aside, resolved to use the bowl to warm his cold hands and try to not feel sorry for himself.

Even though he had his head down, he noticed that the door opened again. The wind was icy and someone in the crowd yelled: “Close the door!” A woman walked in clutching her thin coat close to her body and taking a seat not far from Craddock. The man in the greasy apron appeared and asked in his typically “friendly” manner: “What do you want?” The woman answered: “A glass of water, please.” He brought the water and inquired what she wanted to eat. “Just the water, thank you,” she said. He impatiently countered with a raised voice, “You have to order, Lady!” “Well, I just want a glass of water,” she replied with a quiet voice. “Look, I have customers who pay. What do you think this is, a church or something? Now, what do you want?” She again ventured to say: “Please, just a little water and a little time to get warm.”

The man wasn’t going to give in. “Look, if you don’t order something, you’ll have to leave!” By now, he was speaking with a loud voice and the previous noise of the crowd

had quieted to a hush. The woman slowly got up to leave. Almost as if rehearsed, one by one, everybody in that café started to get up and head for the door. Craddock joined the effort and said to himself: “I’m voting for something here. I don’t really know what it is.” As the masses moved toward the door, the man bellowed: “All right, all right. She can stay!” Satisfied, people took their seats again and the man brought a bowl of soup to the woman.

Craddock decided to ask the person next to him if he knew her. He was greeted with the simply reply: “Never seen her in my life.” Others around him turned their attention back to their soup. He could hear the sipping noises and the spoons clinking against the edge of the bowls. After listening for a while, Craddock decided to pick up his own spoon again and give that soup another try. He took time to savor, saying to himself that this soup really wasn’t all that bad. The more he ate of it, the more it started to taste a little like bread and grape juice. Yes, just a little like bread and grape juice.

What struck me about the story was that a bunch of strangers suddenly became a community around their common human need not only for sustenance but also dignity. A denial to care for either prompted a communal act of faithful disobedience. I was touched by the fact that the other guests did not go for the easy fix. Someone could have offered to pay for her soup and appeased the stressed-out server. That could have kept everybody happy and warm as well but it would not have had the same impact. The people who almost exposed themselves to the elements in protest opted for a risky solidarity that could have exposed them to the punishing elements of a winter storm. They stood up and showed with their hearts, minds and bodies, their whole selves, that no one is to be turned away from the table of God’s grace, especially not when times are hard.

It’s perhaps not hard to see how this story can help us connect to the gift of communion that we are about to share and to rejoice in the kind of communion that takes place at every soup lunch we service during these winter months. The story can also be a reminder of how much a warming center can do for our community should

the need arise. But what does it have to do with the Gospel text for today, this first Sunday in Advent? Advent is a wonderful time of watchful and hopeful preparation for the arrival of the Christ child. It is not a passive time. A number of scripture texts during this time call on us to be alert, to get our own hearts, minds, and houses in order for Christ's coming.

It may seem odd to us that the first Sunday in Advent usually features texts about the so called *second coming*. This is also the case with our text from Luke 21:25-36. If the baby hasn't even arrived yet, why get all riled up about his return? We have to remember that early Christians experienced great travail. Early visions of an apocalypse (the revelation of the end times) varied in their assumptions as to whether God's "divine clean-up" of the world (J.D. Crossan) would be accomplished through violent means. They continued to see great suffering in the world, including the violent suppression of a Jewish revolt at the hands of the Romans around 72 C.E. Many just wanted to affirm God's power to transform the world at any moment by imagining a return of Christ who would then institute and establish his alternative kingdom.

I would argue that the extent to which this imagination portrays Christ as a violent warlord, as it does in some passages of the Book of Revelation, it also mirrors the extent to which we have not been ready to fully integrate the nature of vulnerability at the heart of the Christmas story. The Christ child is not born in a palace, protected by a mighty army, but is born vulnerably, to vulnerable people in vulnerable times in need to solidarity and support. In solidarity, God is intentionally being born into the context of the world's suffering to embrace it and transform it through courage, compassion and love. The paintings that are now all around us speak to the beauty of precisely a vulnerability bolstered by an abiding hope in the transformative presence and love of God. It is not a sentimental love but a fierce and daring love amidst the world's suffering.

At their best, texts about a second coming intend to express hope in God's ability to speak a "yes" that transforms the world's attempts to say "no" to love, compassion,

hope, equality, justice, and transformation. They can wake us up and push us to live in the moment with an integrity that mirrors the promises and challenges of the Gospel in our day. Somebody on this planet and creation itself are experiencing what may feel like an apocalypse every single day. The Knox County Sheriff elect, Tim Carroll, just spoke at the West Bay Rotary meeting about the enormous prevalence of domestic abuse and addiction in our county. His presentation was a reminder of the need for sober houses and better follow-up with people who come out of jail so that people do not get stuck in a revolving door of suffering that is costly to them and the whole community on a multitude of levels. Every single day, things take place that call on us to “stand up and raise our heads,” as the Gospel says. Every day, we are called upon to, “...be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

I hear Craddock’s story also as saying that our alertness is so essential not because it allows us to escape tribulations as individuals but because it can challenge and encourage us to stand up together so that all of us are spared greater suffering. Rather than live in fear of the tribulations that can befall us each day, we can look to the coming of the Christ child to remember that God joins us in our daily effort to withstand hardship and to create community in our midst. Like our forbearers, we are invited to get ready and to remain ready for all the ways God breaks into our world. As Richard Rohr and others suggest, this in-breaking happens also through each and all of us by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the second coming, regardless of what may lay ahead in the mystery of faith, happens each day and every day in the collective presence of the living body of Christ. May we indeed remain alert and ready to respond as people who are not afraid to stand up and raise our heads, believing that the Holy Spirit will forge our shared healing and transformation. We are truly not alone. Thanks be to God.

