

Advent2-2017—Tree of Life Isa. 40: 1-11, 28-31 Ro. 15: 4ff Luke 21: 25ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

A group of parishioners under the care of the Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard complained that scripture texts like the one from Luke today were simply too overwhelming for them to grasp, and frightening as well. “Whatever, should we do with our lack of understanding?”, they asked. Kierkegaard suggested they deal with the scriptures they could grasp. “That” he said, “should be enough to occupy you for a lifetime”! That is true enough, but their plaintive concern is well voiced. There are perhaps no other sayings of Jesus more difficult to hear, to work our way through, to know how to respond to, than these. The language is frankly foreign to our ears and ways of thinking, and we could be tempted to simply pass over them for something more familiar and palatable. (I have to confess to thinking, “Aren't we in a season of light and celebration?! Why do you have to be such a killjoy?) Nevertheless, Apocalyptic phrases and images, however we may feel about them, are part of the witness and message of multiple faith traditions, and are worthy of our hearing if we can get to the heart of the truth they seek to convey.

Let us try to re-frame and get a window on the way we see and approach these words about endings and beginnings, threats and promises, losses and hope. A number of years ago I had a coworker who was coming up on a family celebration. It was the birthday of his spouse and while the exact number eludes my memory, it was a fairly significant one. A few days prior to the turning of the calendar I inquired what plans he had made for the big day. Maybe a surprise party or dinner at an upscale venue or a night away from the regular rhythms of life seemed like good guesses, or even some custom jewelry. “Oh, nothing special was the reply. Yeah, I have asked her a couple of times what she wanted and she said ‘Nothing really’, so I have no plans”! How do you think that is going to work, Einstein?!! Would you really believe “Nothing”?? What was really behind her response? Was it not likely an affirmation that whatever he did out of love for her would be welcomed?! Here is the point; behind every no there is likely a yes to something else waiting to be discovered. Behind negations there are generally affirmations and beyond endings there may be new beginnings. But we have to look carefully and listen deeply to catch them.

So, let us use that frame and hear these words which both Isaiah and Jesus speak. “There will be signs in sun and moon, perplexity among nations, people struck with fear...for the powers of the heavens will be shaken...heaven and earth will pass away”. Now that is pretty heavy stuff and people use it as a fear tactic, but I think it is merely a way of stating a basic reality: **be careful about placing your trust in what is temporary!!** The negative here is all things pass away; the positive is the call to look to what doesn't. My Word (my activity) will not.

I have been re-reading Aquinas, who bases his theological work on Aristotle. You know that Greek philosophers along with modern thinkers like Newton and Galileo, and Fred Hoyle thought that creation and matter was permanent; it had always been and always would be. But that appears to not be the case. The Big Bang brought what is into being, and that is in constant change. It is temporal.

And nations, politically, culturally, economically are as well. Remember that when Isaiah wrote the power of Babylon, which seemed supreme, had been overthrown and now even that security had been lost. Israel came back home but with no clear future in view. Comfort was the needed word. When Jesus spoke it was the Peace of Rome that was unshakeable, yet that was an illusion.

And we, too, are temporal. It is a reality we come to know regularly. Don't you think the people in Las Vegas, or New Mexico, or living under oppressive governments, or suffering in hunger here feel it? What are we to say to all of this or do with it? What happens when we run headlong into negations-No? Jesus speaks of fear overtaking humans, and it is fear that darkens the world more than perhaps any other emotion or stance. It leads us to forget who we are in this life. It leads us to seek security and permanence in places that are neither secure nor permanent. And, it leads us to see each other as threats and not fellow sojourners.

Let me suggest that we are offered these negations...words of 'NO', for a deeper purpose---to lead us to not be tempted to trust in what passes away, but to put our vision elsewhere. On the mercy and grace of the divine whose love for creation transcends temporary brokenness. There is a "YES" lurking behind these words; it is found in what we call HOPE. Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope resides in the human heart and mind, brings resilience and courage, and transforms endings into new beginnings. Its source is faith and trust that God is more for us than we can be for ourselves.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn, a survivor of Auschwitz and writer for the BBC was sent to the concentration camp as a 13 year old. He wrote, "For a while my father and I shared a barrack. In spite of the unspeakable horror and oppression, many Jews held on to what scraps of religious observance as they were able.

One midwinter night one of the inmates reminded us that tonight was the first night of Chanukah, The Festival of Lights. My father constructed a little menorah out of scrap metal. For a wick, thread from his prison uniform. For oil, butter he somehow obtained from a prison guard. Such observances were strictly 'verboden', but we were used to such risks. YET, I protested the "waste" of such calories. Would it not be better to share the butter on a crust of bread than to burn it?

"Hugo", said my father, "both you and I know that a person can live a very long time without food. But, Hugo, I tell you, a person cannot live a single day without hope!! The Menorah is the fire of Hope. Never let it go out—not here—Not Anywhere.

This is the great YES behind what is temporal. And there are signs of that hope to be seen around us. It does require eyes attuned to our hearts as well as minds, to relationships more than possessions, to love rather than hate, fear, or apathy. But the signs are here...The people of God who reject power misused and misnamed no matter where it originates. The faithful who refuse hatred, internecine strife, and mistreatment of others, and who choose love as the one final action worthy of the Name of Christ; those persons, fallible and perhaps falteringly, who when the foundations of life are shaken or shattered, personally or corporately, who seek the source and Giver of life as the only possible future. Hope is to be found in communities which are places of light, courage, and confidence, and that welcome those who are afraid and seek to live without fear and darkness. The only future worthy of God is where hope abounds. There is a great YES awaiting us all. Amen+