

Advent I (RCL/C): Natural Disasters, Prairie Dogs and Our Neighbors

Jeremiah 43:14-16

Luke 21:25-36

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My oldest niece, Nancy, married an Alaskan, Jim, and they live in Anchorage. Kristiane flew out there to spend Thanksgiving with them. She was scheduled to change planes at SeaTac Airport in Washington State. Her flight was diverted to Spokane, though. At first she thought that was because of fog in Seattle, a not-uncommon occurrence. But then she texted me that the real reason was smog – from the California forest fires. It had traveled from California, north through Oregon, all the way to Washington. Thankfully all air traffic had been grounded in Seattle, outgoing as well as incoming, so even though the original flight was 2-3 hours late in arriving, Kristiane safely made the connecting flight to Anchorage.

The next day (the day before Thanksgiving) my globe-trotting daughter texted me that she had just slept through an earthquake that registered 2 on the Richter scale. Phew, I thought! Glad it wasn't any bigger than that. (Kristiane arrived home safely a week ago.)

Of course, we've since learned that the 2.0 tremor last week was precursor to the 7.0 quake this Friday whose epicenter was very close to Anchorage. My niece was stuck on the 8th floor of the office building where she works for at least a couple hours. Evacuation couldn't occur till the building stopped shaking. Maybe you've seen the video of a courtroom (definitely shaken not stirred), pictures bouncing off the wall, ceiling tiles falling, people huddling under desks or in doorways for cover. Or the images of rippled macadam on a cracked highway, cratered with sinkholes, sporting a car stranded on a stretch of road that is now inaccessible. Or still photos of kitchens littered with smashed china and glassware and of supermarkets whose shelves have collapsed and whose inventory pitched onto the floor. We're nearing the shortest day of the year, and if you think there's too little daylight here, just compare it to Alaska, where sunrise is about 9 a.m. and sunset is 3:30 p.m. It's cold and dark there, and many people are without electricity. In the first 24 hours there were over a thousand aftershocks, with many more to come. Thankfully the tsunami warning was cancelled, though that was a fear for awhile on Friday, too.

So you know some people are going to say that these natural disasters are signs that the world is surely coming to an end. People have been experiencing natural disasters and saying exactly that for thousands of years. Listen to this:

*The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is torn asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.
The earth staggers like a drunkard,
it sways like a hut....*
Isaiah 24:19-20a

That's from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, who lived hundreds of years before Christ. And the Jerusalem that Jeremiah knew hadn't been subjected to an earthquake, but it had been leveled by war. In 587 B.C. when the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom of Judah and forced many Jews into exile, they also destroyed Jerusalem. In that same chapter of Jeremiah we read about the people actually tearing down their houses to get raw materials to build defenses against the Babylonians' siege ramps. We hear about a city that was **desolate** after the onslaught, with no sign of either human **or** animal life. It was **as** or even **more** wrecked as the communities in California that have suffered the floods that followed the fires.

In the time between Jesus' resurrection and the recording of St. Luke's Gospel, Jerusalem was destroyed **again**, this time by the Romans. Jeremiah and Luke wrote to people who had lost much and who had at least flirted with despair. On one hand you could say, things were so bad they could only get better. On the other hand, you could say that things were so bad the people were **afraid to hope**, unwilling to be disappointed/devastated all over again.

Advent is all about hope. That's why the paraments on altar, pulpit, lectern, and my stole are all blue: the color of hope. (Why do **you** think it's the color of hope? Blue skies? Heaven? Because it's the color of sea and sky, it's associated with depth and stability, trustworthiness. Also, deep blue is the color of the heavens right before dawn... "*My soul waits for the Lord, and in his word do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning....*" [Psalm 130:6] Interesting sidenote: people who study these things say that the color blue suppresses appetite. Have you ever seen an Italian restaurant

with blue walls or tablecloths? No, right? They're red!) We Christians are to be people of hope. In the Gospel Jesus says,

"Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:28)

'Makes me think of prairie dogs standing on their hind legs, little heads at attention, scanning the horizon for what's coming next over the prairie! Or that beautiful verse from the letter to the Romans: *"All of creation is on tiptoe, waiting for the sons and daughters of God to come into their own."* [Romans 8:19] Our Lord Jesus has already accomplished everything necessary for our redemption. His great sacrifice on the cross was made once, for all. We are not **yet** what we **will** be, though. We live in the 'tween time between Jesus' coming once and His coming again, when **all** God's promises will be fulfilled. The Kingdom is among us, the Kingdom is within us, but God's Kingdom hasn't come **fully** yet.

I confess that I feel a bit judgmental toward people who think every natural disaster announces that the Final Curtain is about to fall. Also, I'm irritated by bumper stickers that say, "In case of rapture, the driver will disappear." But I read something that challenged me. It said we can be just as off-base as the "Left Behind" folks who expect the Lord to come any moment **if** we don't acknowledge His proximity to us, His presence among us **already** – in the Word, in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, in the last, the lost and the least whom He calls "members of My family" (Matt. 25:42). In today's epistle from the 1st letter to the Thessalonians we find a prayer to refocus us off doomsday predictions and to fend off spiritual paralysis brought about by unholy panic:

...may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all... And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13

I don't have a crystal ball, but I'm thinking chances are that I'll go to the Lord before He comes back to us again. Meanwhile, I am to increase and abound in love. We are to perform continuous deeds of faith-active-in-love. We are to love God above all else and love our neighbors as ourselves: no exceptions.

I got a call from *The Coast Star* this week, asking for comment about the signboard message

that so many of our Ministerium churches posted at the same time:

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR:
NO EXCEPTIONS!

I simply explained that local faith leaders realize our message is stronger when we speak in unison. We may be many individual churches (with a small c), but most importantly we are all part of one Church (with a capital C). We hear a lot in the news about “us” and “them.” The Lord of the Church who died for all sees only “us”; there is no “them” in God’s sight.

So it is that we care for those of “**us**,” near and far, who suffer from hurricanes, forest fires, earthquakes, famine, war, displacement, violence and poverty. So it is that we pray to increase and abound in love. So it is that we **live in faith, serve in love, wait in hope** for all God’s promises to be fulfilled and for God’s Kingdom to come not just **to** us but **through** us. As a wise Christian once said: “The Christian conception of history is that it has a goal and at that goal Jesus Christ will be Lord of all. That is all we know, and all we need to know.”¹ Amen

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (rev. ed., Daily Study Bible Series. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975.) p. 261.

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