

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

Stay Alert

Yesterday I heard a truly inspiring sermon. I wasn't the only one; a 91-year-old woman told the preacher it was one of the best sermons she'd ever heard! Good to know that we have the opportunity to hear the gospel proclaimed so effectively and faithfully in our presbytery.

After the service, I met with the pastor and his wife, and we talked about several things that were very important in my formative years as a seminarian: spirituality, discernment, and sermon writing. More specifically, we discussed how to edit sermons to meet the 15-20 minute limit that most Presbyterians expect in a sermon. I remember my mentor saying that if you preach every week, it's easier to let go of a particular point because you know you can pick it up some other Sunday.

I remembered that last week, because when I was writing my column about letting go of worry, this voice inside me kept saying “Don't be a Pollyanna—you still have to be alert!”

Yes, letting go of undue worry does not mean letting go of our senses. I've always felt that the best modern-day demonstration of God's sovereign grace and constant protection is the LA freeway system. I think it's a miracle that 4-6 million commuters hit the road in LA County every day, with an average of 111 accidents—that's about 1 accident for every 45,000 drivers! While we don't need to be overwhelmed with worry about being one of those unlucky 111, we still use our seatbelts and stay alert on the road.

Even with all the comforting Bible passages about God's care for us, the first Sunday of Advent in all three years of the lectionary includes a Gospel passage warning us to be alert. So yesterday's passage was Luke 21:25-36 which includes these warnings from Jesus:

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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. . . .

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 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.

Note that Jesus is warning us not to be distracted by “the worries of this life.” So the concern is not that we become careless, but that we be clear where we put our attention. In fact I do believe that we fall short of the bold obedience that Jesus calls us to by focusing on small worries of our own imagination. We focus so much on worries about what might happen that we don't dare attempt what can transform the world. We worry more about what other people will say or do, and dismiss God by either assuming God will forgive anything, or we doubt that God will protect us if we take the risk of doing God's will. But God has provided for us; perhaps not exactly as we would wish it, but we have reason to trust that God knows best.

Because I don't know the mind of God, I cannot guarantee that those who follow God's will are immune from hardship. But neither can I say that those who hide themselves away from risk are immune, so why not try to do as God suggests?

I share this not because I am so bold. When I served a Native Hawaiian church, I was impressed with how closely they seemed to feel the Spirit, and once they discerned God's will, they felt resolved to move ahead without fear. One of the lay leaders stated that she could tell when God was speaking by her sense of certainty of the right course to take. I, on the other hand, sensed God's will with great fear and trepidation. Do you know that if there's a fire in your building, you should keep the doors shut, especially if you feel the door and it's warm? Well, that's how I felt about following God's will—as if I'm going through the door that is warm with fire! But even though I've taught myself to go through that door in spite of my fears, it doesn't mean that I don't keep my eyes open when I go!

And surely, the path that God lays out before us can have its potholes. But there will also be grace, and confirmation that God is with us, and God is pleased. And that is what I have witnessed in the life of San Gabriel Presbytery.

As we begin the season of Advent, we know that this season of anticipation includes warnings to be alert, and the declaration of righteous disruption that comes from the young pregnant virgin Mary. But when we look around—to the continued violence in Gaza, the impacts of climate change, our seeming normalization of gun violence, and suffering in unseen places like Sudan and Congo—disruption is necessary. The great leap of faith for us Christians is to see the potential for salvation not in a spectacular reversal of world events, but in the birth of a baby to a displaced family in an occupied land. How great is our God, and how wondrous is God's wisdom, to save the world in this quiet and unexpected way!

As we journey with Mary through her pregnancy, as we share the hushed anticipation and hope of a hurting world, as we await the inbreaking of grace the baby Jesus brings, may we stand up and raise our heads, confident that all this and more are part of God's bold plan of salvation. May we stay alert and trusting in God's merciful power, even in the face of trouble and doubt. And may these holy days ahead be full of hope and signs of glory—for you and for all the world.

Praying and waiting,

Wendy