

Afraid of the Future?

Everyone has at least a slight fear of the unknown. It could be things on a micro level such as meeting the fiancé's family for the first time. It could be something macro such as the pace of climate change. Whatever the case, the key to surviving our fears is certainly not by pushing them away because that is impossible. Fears arise outside of our control. Fear is a natural and healthy emotional reaction to whatever circumstances confront us. If we are to live through our fears successfully, we need to acknowledge that emotion and then choose to learn what fear is trying to teach.

People do take various measures to deal with fears of what may happen. I remember in the late 1950's and early 1960's people feared a nuclear attack after the Soviet Union had developed an atomic bomb. Many bomb shelters were built. In the 1970' or '80's, Christian sects tried to set themselves up for the best possible outcome of the Rapture, an event in which Christians, dead and alive, would be taken up into the clouds to a heavenly home. The effectiveness of these responses to fear of the unknown can be debated, but they were practical responses, nonetheless.

I bring the subject of fear up because the Gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent is scary. For those who are not Christian churchgoers, Advent is the season before celebrating Christmas, a period that includes the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. This year, the First Sunday of Advent is on November 30th. Certain readings from the Bible are assigned to the days of Advent.

Although Advent leads up to celebrating the "first" coming of the Messiah, that is, the birth of Jesus, Advent is more about preparing for the second coming of the Messiah at the end times. During Advent we focus our awareness on the fact that we are in-between Jesus' earthly walk and his Second Coming. It is our lot in life as believers to live not with the security of someone at the end of a journey but with the uncertainty of those on the way. Advent instructs us on how to live with the Kingdom still a dream and how to struggle in the most real ways to bring it about. Advent is all about equipping us to engage the world as we find it and to live lives of virtue, as individuals and as communities, to expand that most profound reality first glimpsed in a stable, the divinization of the world.

This is what the Gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent says (note: "Son of Man" is one of several titles given to Jesus in the New Testament writings):

There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish, distraught at the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the earth. The powers in the heavens will be shaken. After that, people will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with great power and glory.

The passage begins by painting an alarming picture, with people responding with fear. The scripture continues,

When these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, for your ransom is near at hand.

This section of the Gospel of Luke (Luke 21: 25-28, 34-36) ends with,

So be on the watch. Pray constantly for the strength to escape whatever is in prospect, and to stand secure before the Son of Man.

Everyone seems to share a feeling of fear at what is coming, but there are two different reactions to that fear. Some people are frightened to the point of death, while others raise their heads and stand up with a sense of reassurance and security. What is it that distinguishes these two groups?

Those who stand up straight and secure are recognizing something or, better, someone in what is unfolding before their eyes. They are seeing the divine, and they realize that there is a connection between the holy and their own lives. There is something shared between themselves and Jesus, an affinity of purpose, an agreement in life choices. In many ways, this Gospel passage about the end times brings to mind the dramatic portrayal of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25: 31-46. There, Jesus validates how some have lived their lives. In so many words he points out that, “You fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty. You welcomed the stranger. You made sure people had adequate clothing, and you cared for the sick. You visited the imprisoned.” In other words, these people lived as Jesus would live. Of course, those who would die of fright at the coming of the Son of Man did not live like that or value what Jesus values.

Tomorrow and the days following bring ... whatever. We do not know. We may be fearful of many things whether on a personal level or regarding national or global contingencies. We can cower like those who died of fright in the Gospel story. Or we can stand secure by aligning our life choices with how we understand the divine, the holy.

The days leading up to Christmas - the days of Advent – afford us the opportunity to realign our values, attitudes, and actions with those of the one whose birth we will celebrate. More to the point of the season, it encourages us to do what we can in this time between Jesus’ first coming and his second coming to bring about the kind of world God intended.