

"Reading the Signs"
Luke 21:25-36

One night, as a great saint lay prostrate on a village road, a thief came upon him. The thief observed a long, gray haired, form lying on the ground and came closer to observe and investigate. In moments, he arrived at the conclusion that this person robbed some house in the neighborhood and ran and ran as fast as he could until, out of sheer exhaustion, he fell flat on his face to the ground. The thief, thinking that the police may arrive at any moment, decided to run away. A while later a drunken man staggered along and upon observing the saint prostrate on the ground thought of the motionless form, "I wonder who this person is camping here in the middle of the night. Alas you had a sip too many and your legs became watery. At least I can walk and not stumble like you," and he wobbled along his merry way. Soon a sage comes walking by and observed the calm, serene posture of the great saint in deep meditation lying on the ground. The sage, while massaging the feet of the great saint remarked, "Here you lie on a dusty roadside, but your heart is pure and full of love for God. Praise be to God!!" An owl observing these vignettes, remarked, "And so is he, for we see in others, what we are ourselves."

What we see sometimes is not the reality of things. We are often certain that what we see is so real, but our seeing must always be examined and infused by God's grace in order to see more clearly. In fact, many times we are so used to seeing things from a certain point of view that we miss a great deal of what is right in front of us.

The invitation of the Gospel lesson this morning from Luke 21 is to be watchful as we pay attention to God's presence and work in the world. The people of Jesus' time have grown accustomed to seeing life from a certain point of view that they were blind to the reality of God's salvation happening right in their midst. They had gotten used to the oppression of the Roman government and to the abuses of the religious system of the temple in Jerusalem. These were things that were part of their daily reality, that they stopped seeing how outrageous and oppressive they were. Most of them were living in poverty, near starvation, so that the leadership of the temple and the government could live in luxury. So, we find Jesus here using apocalyptic imagery to help wake his followers from the nightmare in which they were living. Apocalyptic imagery about the Day of the Lord is often used in the Bible to show the conflict between the values of the kingdom of God and the unjust realities of the people of God. The whole Gospel of Luke revolves around the theme of the kingdom of God which is the reality Jesus is renewing with a deep commitment to social, economic and spiritual justice. The kingdom of God is about the community of Jubilee. This is the practice of ancient Israel of releasing debts, land and slaves every 49 years so that no one has to lose their property forever and no one has to live in utter poverty.

In Luke 21, Jesus describes the end-times telling the disciples that there will be natural disasters, human-brought disasters, and continuing persecution of the church. Jesus describes here the culmination of the clash between those who follow the way of the kingdom of God, the community of Jubilee and the systems and people of society that battle such a world because they want to dominate, exploit, and oppress. With the eyes of faith, the followers of Christ are invited to renew their vision for God's justice in the world. They are invited to see with new eyes the realities of the world, so that they can join God's mission of transforming them through love. Yet, the vision that Jesus gives does not promise safety and serenity in the traditional sense to his followers. As people of the Kingdom of God, we enter into the struggles against oppression, the struggles to serve and love those who are deemed unworthy in our world.

One of the things that scholars tell us about apocalyptic imagery is that the communities that produce these visions are usually themselves subject to tyranny and persecution. Apocalyptic made sense to them. Those who have endured (or still endure) oppressive situations relate to apocalyptic literature better than most of us. Allan Boesak, renowned South African preacher, once remarked that it made sense for him to preach on apocalyptic themes during the years of apartheid, for apocalyptic images spoke to and adequately described the lives of his listeners. Boesak's parishioners knew what it was like to live each day as if it were the end of the world. Their community had experienced appalling calamity and had witnessed evil dragons prowling in the land. When the trucks and armored carriers called "hippos" would come to surround their townships with razor wire, Boesak described them as great beasts which vomited an obscene, barbed cargo calculated to cut people off from each other and from hope. This imagery wasn't a scary and pessimistic way to see for these folks. Indeed it was the only way for them to make sense of their plight in the world.

Advent is the season of being awake, preparing the way of the Lord. Part of our preparation is our way of being. The way we read the news, the way we see the world, the way we look at others are all connected to our sense of being awake. The kingdom of God as a reality of Jubilee will not be accomplished unless we are able to see as God sees. Through the eyes of God we can see the pain of the world and work for justice without having to be limited by ideology, political affiliation or even personal preferences. Through the eyes of God, we can see how our attachments to familiar ways of being and false securities often don't bring new life.

A few years ago I learned a prayer that is attributed to Meister Eckhart that goes like this, "To see as God sees, to know as God knows, to feel as God feels, to be as God is." This is an incredible prayer for a deeper way of being and seeing in our world. Often times, we pray in the morning and then we go about our daily business as usual as if God is not part of the picture. But this prayer is about seeing, knowing, feeling and being all the time with the awareness of God in us.

In his book, *The Naked Now*, Richard Rohr notes that, "Throughout history, contemplative seeing appears to be the minority position, which is probably what Jesus is so disappointed with in the Judaism of his day... We see things not as they are but as we are... How you see is what you see. And to see rightly is to be able to be fully present –without fear, without bias, and without judgment. [The kingdom of God is] a way of seeing and thinking now. The kingdom of God is the naked now –the world without human kingdoms, ethnic communities, national boundaries, or social identifications. That is about as subversive and universalist as you can get. But don't think about that too much; it will surely change your politics and your pocketbook."

So we come to this season of Advent as we are to prepare our hearts for the birth of Jesus. We come with the invitation to see as God sees, to take the time to really see our world as God sees it, so that we may live in the kingdom of God, in the community of Jubilee. Our hope during this season does not come from our grand celebrations, dinners and gifts. Our hope comes from the ability to see and to know that Christ is born into each of our hearts so that our world is transformed from a place of greed and indifference to a community of care and compassion. But the key to all of this is our ability to stay awake and to see as God sees.

Once upon a time there was an old monk who had become the revered abbot of a monastery. One day a very young and enthusiastic monk came to question him about his life. "Father," he asked, "in all these years of prayer and discipline, of early rising and penance, have you become enlightened or holy?" The old abbot broke into peals of laughter, saying, "If you have to

ask, isn't it obvious? No, I've not become all that holy. And wisdom or enlightenment? I don't know. Sometimes it's hard enough just to survive day-to-day with some sort of gracefulness. To learn wisdom as well is asking for a lot." But the young monk was serious and pushed him: "Then why do you stay? Have you learned nothing all these years?" The old monk eyed him seriously and answered, "Well, yes, I have learned one thing about God. Stay awake! You never know when God is going to decide to come and visit you. Stay awake! You never know when all your plans so carefully laid and detailed will be derailed, when your patterns and routines will be rudely interrupted. Stay awake! God loves to surprise you, catch you off guard, and throw you off balance, coming and insisting that God be allowed in to the center of your life. So, stay awake!"

May this time of Advent be a time of watchfulness and seeing so that you are able to see as God sees, to know as God knows, to feel as God feels, and to be as God is. Amen.