

## LAST BEFORE FIRST

With the approach of Advent, we begin again to prepare for the new covenant as it comes with the birth of Jesus. As Christians, we believe that God's physical intervention in time and space is the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophets. In Isaiah 65 God promises, 'I am about to create new heavens and a new earth'. This new earth brings a relationship with humanity so close that, 'Before they call, I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear them...' and so peaceful that 'The wolf and the lamb shall graze together and the lion shall eat hay like the ox.' Is. 65.24-25 The psalmist too rejoices, '... God will rule the world with justice and the people with equity.'

The readings this week are dense and prophetic about the 'end of the world'. Jesus said in Luke's Gospel, 'There will be signs in the sun, moon and the stars, and on earth distress among nations caused 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 heaven 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.'

As we await the first Sunday of Advent, we note that the traditional New Testament readings do not direct our attention toward the joys of the first Christmas. Instead we are slapped with the uncertainty and violence of human history – signs of dread, floods and earthquakes. We ask, how is Christmas related to the wild depictions of cosmic desolation? Part of the problem, I think, is that we westerners see time as a line. We think in terms of a beginning, a middle and an end. I think that God's view of time is a circle. Time is timeless.

If we enter the Advent journey with this perspective of God's time, we can sense afresh that God's time is redemptive – Jesus has come, Jesus comes, Jesus will come. All times are the end times. Jesus has been born; but we act as if we are still waiting. Christ will return, yet Christ has already come. But what of our world and the fear that is ever present? Our cities and churches are full of people who are afraid – afraid of loss of their jobs, of income, of health care, of decency, of safety, of change. We may imagine that the past was better, safer, cleaner and more stable. But I suspect that was not the case.

Jesus says, 'When you see these things do not cower in fear, for your transformation is drawing near'. Advent teaches us that in the darkest places of human oppression, the pain of hunger and political distress, that God's reign is among us. 'Do not be caught off guard by the fear-filled tides of history, but be mindful, praying for strength, that you may escape the fears that drown the earth, and may stand with God.' Luke 21.36

Jesus also speaks of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. What he is really saying is that God's home is not among buildings but in the love of our hearts and the generosity of our actions. The disciples, preoccupied with

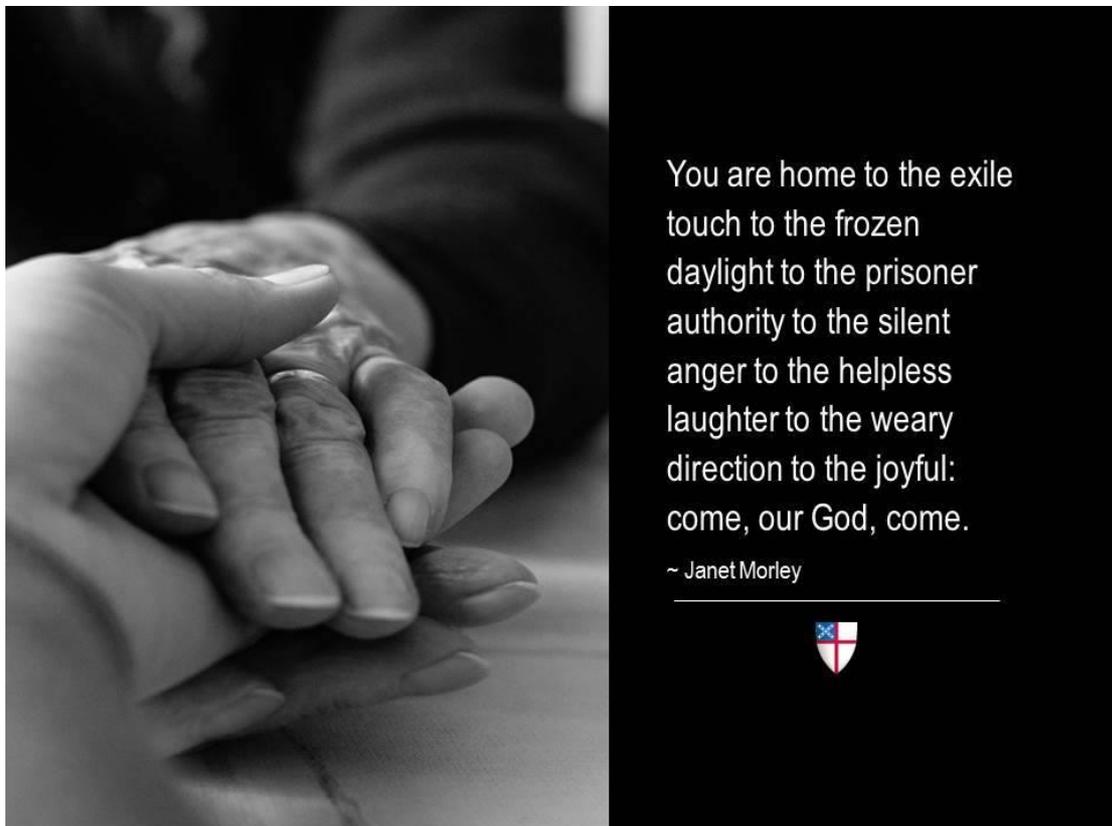
rumours of apocalypse, are slow to understand. Jesus assures them that though natural catastrophes will happen, what is more important are the personal catastrophes that will occur when they dare to take God's word out of places of worship and into the streets. Not only will 'nation rise against nation', but his followers will be persecuted 'because of the name of Jesus'. Either the world is about to crack or God's rule reigns. The time of God's new rule will require us, the faithful, to run risks. Jesus knows that the church will conflict with 'the authorities', will be brought to court, and will give testimony about the power of Easter against the force of death. But, says Jesus, those who run that risk will gain their souls and not lose a hair of their heads.

Our texts today speak of great expectation along with great danger. Do we read the passages as examples of interesting but antiquated cosmology that we can just dismiss? Do we read the texts literally or find parallels in today's world, and interpret things allegorically?

Many believe that Jesus will come soon. But this has happened in history many times before. Our only course is to be ready – living with faith, hope, love and peace – the four meanings of our advent candles. To be ready for an exit from home we pack our cases with what we will need. What will we put in our 'cases' for Advent this year?

May God help us all to *get* ready in order to *be* ready. AMEN

Luke 21. 5-19



You are home to the exile  
touch to the frozen  
daylight to the prisoner  
authority to the silent  
anger to the helpless  
laughter to the weary  
direction to the joyful:  
come, our God, come.

~ Janet Morley



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