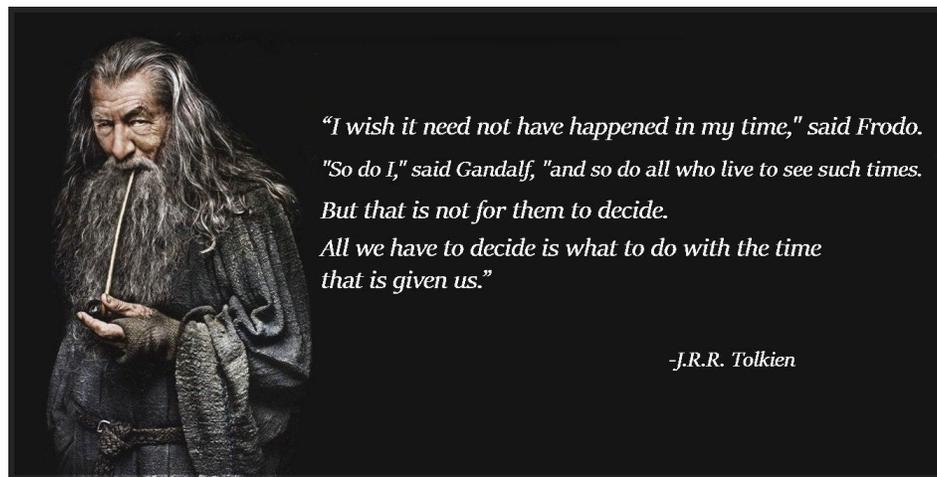


The First Sunday of Advent  
November 28, 2021  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 33:14-16  
Psalm 25:1-9  
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13  
Luke 21:25-36

Early on, in the first volume of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Frodo laments the burden that has been thrust upon him. The times are dark. And he is but one small hobbit. Feeling overwhelmed, he shares his concerns with Gandalf, the wizard:



That conversation has come up more than once in the past – especially these past 21 months. None of us have chosen the challenges thrust upon us by a worldwide pandemic.

None of us has chosen any of the challenges of our present times: not the pandemic ... and the ways it has disrupted church life – indeed, all of life; nor the way vaccines and masks have become political statements rather than merely public health concerns; nor the horrors of racial violence that have made household names of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor; nor the judicial system that exonerated Kyle Rittenhouse – and a political climate that seeks to make him a hero; nor the looming climate catastrophe (and world leaders who seem ill-prepared – or ill-equipped – to respond with the necessary verve to match the need.

I wish none of these had happened in my time.

This morning's gospel pertains. Eugene Peterson's translation of the opening verses perfectly captures the mood – the mood of biblical times, I think, and the present moment, as well:

*It will seem like all hell has broken loose – sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.*

I'm not saying that the Bible predicted our current crises. But the Bible does speak to us in our current times, even so, offering a word to encourage us when it seems "like all hell has broken loose." That's the thread I see running through our readings today.

When Jeremiah offered the word we heard in our first reading this morning, he was, at the time, in prison, and he prophesied to a people who were, at that time, living in exile. And yet, he offers a promise from God:

*I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David.*

In our second reading, St. Paul addresses the early church in Thessalonica. What you wouldn't know is that Paul was just out of prison in his time, and the church he writes to was frightened about their future. They all had reasons to cower, but Paul writes to encourage them not to hunker down and keep themselves safe, but rather to grow in hope and love and in care for one another. It's the only way to face whatever lies ahead, he says.

In this morning's gospel, we hear Jesus' words about terrifying times to come – of signs in the heavens and on the earth. But what we didn't hear is that when Jesus spoke of these things it was just days before his crucifixion. That's what Luke tells us. And when Luke himself wrote these words down, a generation later, he was describing the world he saw when he looked around, a world that seemed to be falling apart. The horrors were clear to everyone – to Jesus, in his time, and to Luke, 40 or 50 years later – but Luke recalls how Jesus also spoke of redemption drawing near. In the midst of the horrors of the times, Jesus says, look for redemption.

None of them chose their times:

- not Jeremiah nor the people in exile,
- not Paul nor the early church in Thessalonica,
- not Jesus nor the believers who struggled a generation later still to believe.

None of them chose the challenges of their times, but they all had to decide what to do with the time they'd been given.

The gospel seems especially on point, right from the start:

*It will seem like all hell has broken loose – sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking. And then – then! – they'll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style – a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!*

When it looks like "all hell has broken loose," rather than duck and take cover like everyone else, Jesus says, "Stand tall with your heads high." That's the first word.

It's the first of three (maybe four?) admonitions: "Stand up and raise your heads." The view is better up there. Help is on the way. It may be something divine and otherworldly, coming down out of the clouds, as this reading describes it, or it may be something far more pedestrian, help coming to us as we work together for a better world. But either way, you won't see it with your head buried in the sand.

Everyone sees the same terrifying world, but you and I – we – are encouraged to see things differently, lest we miss seeing what we most need to see.

There's a story told about a street preacher exhorting the crowd he'd gathered to "get right with God" because Jesus was coming soon! An old man was walking by about this time, walking with a cane and moving slowly. And when he heard the message of the street preacher, he straightened up and said, 'What in blazes are you talking about? He's already here.'"<sup>1</sup>

I think that's why Jesus follows his first admonition "to stand up and raise your heads" with a story about a fig tree. "Look at the fig tree," Jesus says. "Look at all the trees," he adds. Look around at the world. There are terrible things to see, absolutely, and also wonders to behold ... all the dang time ... everywhere you look:

- Yes, terrible things happen in this world. And beautiful things, too. Don't let the terrible blind you to the beautiful.
- We all die in the end. But while we have life, there is so much to celebrate. Don't forget to live and to love ... as long as you have breath and a beating heart.

And, finally, there is the admonition: "Be on guard."

But it might be better translated, "Pay attention to yourselves ..." It's more than an admonition to look up at the clouds for signs in the heavens or to check out the proverbial leaves of the trees for signs on the earth. It's a warning not to let "this, that, and the other thing" become distractions. Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it, "Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping." ('Tis the season!)

It is not our job to save the world; that job belongs to God in the end. We cannot fix all that is wrong with the world, but we can look for signs of hope in an all-too-often bleak world. And we still have a part to play in this cosmic drama. We still can continue to care for the little corner of the world we happen to inhabit.

Today, here at Trinity, we see a sign that offers hope. For the first time since the middle of March 2020, we are worshipping together in this house of prayer. Thank God we have come to this day. And thank YOU for doing your part. We couldn't be together today were it not for your willingness to wear masks – out of love and care for one another – and to get vaccinated.

You are a sign, a prophetic sign, as you continue to care for this little corner of the world. You are a sign of love in a world that is so often driven by fear. We hold that love shall rule the day and the year and the rest of time: Love of God. Love of neighbor. Love of self. So, yes, wear a mask today. Absolutely. And yes, get the jab. And the second jab. And the booster, too.

We are not naïve. We are not ignorant of the deep trauma and wounds in our world, but we are a people who see the world with “eyes wide open.” For all its brokenness, we still believe that this isn’t the end, that God’s dream for our world is coming.

I opened with a bit of a conversation from a book in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. J.R.R. Tolkien lived in a frightening world. Both his parents died when he was a child. He fought in WWI and witnessed WWII, as well. *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954, by which time Tolkien had seen and experienced so much of the darkness, sadness, fear, rage, and chaos of this world. But he did not run from pain, nor did he suppress it. He took to heart, instead, the conviction that the good in this world will ultimately overwhelm the evil.

And so I’ll close with a bit of another conversation from one of his books, a conversation between Frodo, a hobbit still overwhelmed by the enormity of the world’s demands on him, and his companion Sam, a hobbit who never falters. I’ll leave them with the last words, words from a fictional tale of hobbits and wizards and magic rings that ring with a gospel truth:

FRODO: I can’t do this, Sam.

SAM: I know. It’s all wrong. By rights we shouldn’t even be here. But we are. It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy. How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened. But in the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something. Even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back only they didn’t. Because they were holding on to something.

FRODO: What are we holding on to, Sam?

SAM: That there’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it’s worth fighting for.

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads.”

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<sup>i</sup> John Petty @ [http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive\\_involvement/2009/11/lectionary-blogging-luke-21-2536.html](http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2009/11/lectionary-blogging-luke-21-2536.html).