



As a country, we seem to be fascinated with disasters, the end times and the apocalypse. Many avidly watch the news every night, especially when coverage is about the continuing bomb attacks in Iraq, or whether the Republic of Congo is going to war or – take your pick of the disaster of the day.

Most of us like our lives to be at least *fairly* ordered and predictable. We tend to get up and to go to bed at about the same time each day. We serve the same foods at holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. Just try changing the menu for one of these family holiday meals and you're certain to hear about it! Maybe we like predictability and order because there are parts of our lives that we don't, and can't, control.

There are times when we clearly are not in control. Where our world may be – either literally or figuratively- coming to an end. Or at least the end of what we have known. We don't know what lies ahead. We just know that life will be different. And that unsettles and frightens us. When we're downsized. When a loved one receives a diagnosis that is unwanted. When treatment for cancer results in really awful side-effects with no assurance that life will get better.

What's next, we ask? We are called to step into the unknown in faith. Craig Kallio, Rector at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Oak Ridge TN, says that:



faith is an ongoing search for meaning. It is not an accomplishment, but a gift. ... We are here today not because of our accumulation of knowledge, but because, in part, God has drawn us here. ... Faith is being in conversation with God.¹

We start a new liturgical year today- Year C. We will read from the Gospel of Luke most every Sunday from now through November 24, 2013. Admittedly, we will have some readings from the Gospel of John sprinkled here and there- but the Sunday gospel focus in Year C is Luke. One of the characteristics of Luke is an emphasis upon God's work in

¹ The Rev. Dr. Craig Kallio, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Oak Ridge, TN. "The Anatomy of Emptiness", in The Anglican Digest, Winter 2009, pps. 7-10.

human history. Luke's God is not removed from our daily lives. Similarly, we are not able to disconnect from God's call to us. Luke also highlights for us how Jesus was a part of a society that had conflicts galore. The land of Palestine was a Roman territory with all the conflicts that go along with an occupying army. The Jewish people were in disarray amongst themselves, with all the conflicts that arise when people of one nation do not agree.

We only have to think back a few days to once again see the warfare between Israel and the Palestinians. Or consider the "fiscal cliff" and how not knowing what is going to happen affects us all in terms of how much in taxes we pay, whether government programs such as Medicare will continue and in what fashion. The list of things outside our control and yet which directly impact the quality of our life goes on and on.

The words from Jesus in Chapter 21 of Luke that are appointed for this First Sunday of Advent are not what we expect, especially as the First Sunday of Advent when we await the birth of Christ. They are not ones that immediately come to mind if someone asks us about Jesus. I'm much more used to rattling off the Beatitudes, or something about one of the healing or feeding miracles, or maybe even Jesus cleansing the Temple. But Jesus talking about the end times? And talking about an apocalypse with signs from sun, moon and stars? No, that's not even on the radar screen in the list of the best known teachings of Jesus, at least for me. It sounds way too "new agey."

We need to be reminded from time to time that true faith is much more complex than simple platitudes. Faith is not just for the easy times when we seem to be in control of our life. Faith is being in conversation with God most especially at the end times, either literally or figuratively, and those times when life is chaos or simply incredibly uncertain. Faith is, in part, finding gratitude when everything around us seems to be in chaos.

The New Zealand Prayer Book has a Liturgy entitled "Thanksgiving for Creation and Redemption." The opening acclamation said by the priest is:

Grace to you and peace
From God our Creator,
The love at our beginning
And without end
In our midst and with us.

And the people respond

God is with us
Here we find new life.²

Jesus commands us to "be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." It is easy for us to be worried about this life. Especially when things do not go as planned. When what we hoped and dreamed for isn't the reality we face. Or as someone said to me "this isn't the retirement we had in mind" after her husband's health deteriorated and they were not able to travel around the world, which is what they had planned and saved for during their working years. Life often is, indeed, unfair or unexpected.

² A New Zealand Prayer Book (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 456.

The good news is that “redemption is drawing near.” New life through faith in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, the redeemer of the world. We do not have to wait for an apocalypse as pictured in the Left Behind series of books or the apocalyptic movies that seem to proliferate each year. We are redeemed today if we will put our faith in Jesus, our Lord and Savior. As the writer of the Gospel of Luke states in Chapter One, Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture. The birth story of Jesus in Luke is the one which includes the angels repeatedly telling various people “do not be afraid” and reminds Mary that with God nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). And Mary responds as each of us is called to respond: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord” (1:38). Mary knows that God is with us and through God we find new life. Mary is grateful even as she faces the unknown. Gratitude is essential if we are to successfully navigate the rough hard places.

The Collect this morning asks God to give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light. The armor of light is the new life when God is with us. We explicitly are reminded that God is our light as we lit the first candle in the Advent wreath today. And, even as we light the first candle, we see that three more remain. We wait through these next 3 Sundays for those candles to be lit as well. Our lives might be compared to the Advent wreath. As we grow in knowledge and faith, as we seek meaning through our relationship with God, more and more light exists. Let us be grateful for the light of the world which pushes away the darkness.

For those hard times when life is spinning out of control, and we need to remember that God does, in fact, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, think about these words from the musical “Carousel”:

When you walk through a storm
 Hold your head up high
 And don't be afraid of the dark
 At the end of a storm is a golden sky
 And the sweet silver song of a lark

Walk on through the wind
 Walk on through the rain
 Tho' your dreams
 Be tossed and blown

Walk on.
 Walk on.
 With hope in your heart
 And you'll never walk alone
 You'll never walk alone

Walk on.
 Walk on.
 With hope in your heart
 And you'll never walk alone
 You'll never walk alone.

The question on the Advent Calendar posted on the bulletin board for today is: “What will you do to share God’s love with others?” Share God’s love by finding something to be grateful for today. For every negative thought, find a positive one. It might be as simple as “I’m grateful for the sunshine” or “I’m grateful for food on the table.” “I’m grateful for friends to share this day with.”

Remember the people’s response to the Thanksgiving for Creation and Redemption:

“God is with us. Here we find new life.”

As you walk on, be grateful and find peace in knowing that God is with us. Candles are lit, both literally in the wreath as we progress through the season of Advent, and figuratively as we continue in relationship with God. Through faith in Jesus Christ, find new life. Find strength and courage to face the day. See light and our paths are made easier for that light. Find ways to share God’s love with others and be grateful. *Amen.*