

A Black Rook in Rainy Weather

Luke 21:25-36

Sermon by Joanne Gallardo

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21:25 "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

21:26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

21:27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.

21:28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

21:29 Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees;

21:30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.

21:31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

21:32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

21:33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

21:34 "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly,

21:35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

21:36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

On the stiff twig up there

Hunches a wet black rook

Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.

I do not expect a miracle

Or an accident

To set the sight on fire

In my eye, not seek

Any more in the desultory weather some design,

But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,

Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,

Occasionally, some backtalk

From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:

A certain minor light may still

Leap incandescent

Out of the kitchen table or chair

As if a celestial burning took

Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then ---

Thus hallowing an interval

Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,

One might say love. At any rate, I now walk

Wary (for it could happen

Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); sceptical,

Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality. With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel.
For that rare, random descent.

-Black Rook in Rainy Weather by Sylvia Plath

I don't particularly like thinking about the end times. For this year in the liturgical season, Advent 1 is apocalyptic. I understand, and yet, I'd rather not. I grew up in a tradition that spoke of the end times most Sundays. I remember a particularly rousing sermon being given by our pastor telling us that environmentalists were worrywarts for telling us that we need to be more careful and loving with our environment. We were told that God is not only in control, God will take us up to Heaven before the earth's destruction. Absolutely no need to worry about the environment today.

This came in stark contrast to the science I was learning in school. I saw pictures of how we were causing oil spills, dumping all sorts of waste in the ocean leading to the Syringe Tide of the late 80s, and our love of paper causing the depletion of forests. I was ideologically stuck between anticipating the End Times and being apprehensive in causing damage to the earth.

My adolescence was fueled with the Left Behind series, causing all sorts of movie spinoffs, usually starring Kirk Cameron, and leading to Christian songs, devotionals, and other prayer materials. My mentor took me to one such movie showing. I left completely terrified, imagining being “swept up” at any moment, and all the car crashes and disasters that would ensue due to people suddenly disappearing. Worst of all, what if I wasn’t good enough and I had to stay behind for the great tribulation? What if I was all alone?

I don’t think much about the end of days anymore. I put that neatly into the “things I cannot control” box in the back of my mind and only choose to worry about it when reading dystopian novels or hear something troubling on the news. So what is this “end of days” text doing right here at the beginning of Advent? It’s disrupting, it’s disturbing. It causes apprehension.

But if we take a broader look at what the coming of Christ means for us in the Advent season, maybe we can better understand these scriptures. And yes, the coming of Jesus, the inbreaking of the incarnate God is very disrupting and very disturbing. Jesus comes to us peacefully as the meek Christ of the manger, but he comes to disrupt. Things are about to be turned on their head. As we prepare for his arrival, it is not without apprehension. Not unlike the apprehension and anticipation that comes with babies. Babies, while blessed bundles of joy, are also loud, awake at all hours, messy, sometimes inconsolable...breaking up our routine, making us alert, and keeping us watchful. Adult Jesus and the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit isn’t much different from baby Jesus, except they have graduated on to disrupting the status quo, discomforting the comforted, and comforting the discomforted. Jesus comes and turns things upside down, backwards, and inside out so much so that he eventually makes way more influential enemies than he does powerful friends and allies. This Christ of the manger becomes Christ, the enemy of the State. Christ the disrupter becomes Christ, the crucified.

These are paradoxes, so it seems. Paradox comes from the Greek “para” or “contrary to,” and “dokein” meaning “to think, seem, or appear.” Baby, savior. Humble, crowned in glory. End, beginning. Later on Jesus will tell us many paradoxical things, such as “Whoever seeks to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will keep it.” For offertory we sang a song called “Never one thing.” The song is about, obviously, not being just one thing. Not only that, about being things that are seemingly opposite, example after example of paradox. The underbelly AND the claw. The grace AND the fall. The profit AND the cost. We

are complicated as people. This baby being born to us in a few short Sundays is no different from the rest of us in that regard.

And our answer to this text is not “when,” as in “when” Christ will come, but are we ready? Are we ready to possibly be the people that are not the last. That aren’t the meek. That aren’t the lowly. That aren’t the poor. Maybe Christ isn’t bringing us comfort. Maybe Christ is bringing us holy disruption. Maybe the disruption we will find is the comforting spirit of Jesus coming from an unlikely source.

So we have disrupting, disturbing, and confusing as our key words to take away from our Advent 1 scripture. Initially, I thought the message for me was, “Ok, I’m supposed to take Christ as an example and be an agitator, a disruptor. I can do that! Say controversial things, be bold, turn things upside down! I can do that any day of the week! I’m an 8 on the Enneagram, we live for this stuff! Our kindred spirit of the Bible is John the Baptist!” But William Wulliman reminds us that this time of year isn’t just about giving, or doing. It’s about receiving. And we as Americans are good givers but terrible receivers. Wulliman says that’s not out of some generous spirit or magnanimous way of being, but it comes out of our arrogance and pride. “We” give. “We” don’t need anything in return. “We” can rest knowing that we’ve been generous and philanthropic. But Christ isn’t here for you to “give” the message of peace, goodwill, disruption, and discomfort, he’s here for you to receive it. Wulliman says what God has in store for us, what God intends for us to receive is so “out there” and so “non traditional” that he had to resort to angels, pregnant virgins, and stars in the sky to get it done. That, of course, comes later in our Advent series. All we can do is prepare ourselves to receive it. Prepare ourselves to receive a gift from a God we hardly even knew.

Our Jeremiah passage points us to the coming of Jesus in a different way. A righteous branch will spring up from David to execute justice and righteousness in the land. While we may like all these words, executing justice and righteousness may mean we are put in our place. We might have control taken from us. Those whom we see as “problematic people” may be the very people God is looking for to bring forth the kingdom now...maybe it doesn’t involve us. Maybe all we are left to do is receive; receive a gift we weren’t expecting from people and situations we thought outside of God’s work in the world. And this, this makes me very uncomfortable.

I was brought up with the adage that it’s better to give than to receive. My father in particular is a very generous man, giving freely of his wallet, his time, his energy to all those who ask of it. He wants nothing in return. When he does get something in return, he’s rather uncomfortable. And while I’m not nearly as generous as he is, I do love to give. I don’t examine my motivations or reasons very often; I hope it’s often out of a generous

heart. But I'm also aware of what giving means for me. It's me being in control, me setting the terms and the timing, me choosing what is given.

To receive something as a gift is much different. You relinquish control because you don't have control over what you're given, you likely can't know for sure when you'll receive it, and the only correct posture is to be grateful. Our apocalyptic text tells us we will not know when the Son of Man will come, that he will come unexpectedly. We can know signs that the coming is near, but no one knows for sure. Jeremiah tells us that he will be wielding justice and righteousness. That only helps us out so much. We are about to receive something that will change our whole lives and change the course of things as we know it. So what are we to do about it? What does this mean for us?

We could be scared. That's how a lot of people feel when they don't know what's going to happen. We could be anxious. That's certainly my go-to emotion when I don't know what lies ahead. The poem from Sylvia Plath talks about spasmodic tricks of radiance. What if we miss it? Are we looking for it? What if it passes us by? What if, like my rapture fears when I was younger, it happens to everyone else and not to me? Am I worthy to receive the gift?

At the beginning of this sermon, I read a poem from my favorite poet, Sylvia Plath, entitled "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." I didn't consider this an "Advent poem" until I saw it show up in an Advent devotional for one of the first few days of Advent. Celestial burning, as Plath describes, takes seemingly everyday objects and turns the ordinary into the miraculous. This in turn, takes us away from our fear of "total neutrality." The ordinary, the everyday, the commonplace black bird sitting on a branch on what sounds like a typical Northern Indiana day can be the making of a miracle. Maybe we shouldn't be looking for choirs of angels, or an "annunciation-like" visitation, or wise men or giant stars. Maybe we should be looking for the unexpected, the everyday, the commonplace.

And again we have our paradox. Disruption/commonplace. Every day/miracle. Discomfort/comfort. For this Advent season, I'm going to keep watch. I'm going to look for what humbles me, turns me around, maybe what takes me down a peg. Because Jesus coming with his justice and righteousness causes a commotion, and I have a lot to learn. I'm going to look for the black rooks in rainy weather, the kitchen table or chair, the angel that chooses to flare suddenly at my elbow, because maybe they have something to teach me about the unexpected, the commonplace, the "thing without portent." Because Jesus used fishermen, loaves of bread, the washing of feet, and donkeys to convey the miraculous, and I'm in need of a miracle. I am apprehensive, because I don't feel very worthy. I live in anticipation, as I live for any encounter of the Divine that I'm blessed with. As we enter this season of waiting, watching, hoping, and wishing, let us remember that the Christ of the manger offers us everyday miracles and disrupted lives, and the only posture we can take is that of grateful reception.

