

Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

First Sunday of Advent, (Dec. 2) 2018

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Clouds were important when I was growing up in West Texas. My grandmother had lived through a tornado when she was a little girl that had almost completely destroyed her hometown. So she tended to be fearful of “clouds.” She didn’t call them thunderstorms or even storms; they were “clouds.” She would look to the northwest and say, “a cloud is coming.” In fact, most everyone I knew had a healthy respect for “clouds.”

But those big thunderclouds forming up toward Lubbock could bring precious life-giving rain as well as life-threatening tornadoes. They represented both good news and bad news all mixed together. So as a boy in West Texas, I learned to pay attention to clouds.

Clouds are mentioned in the Bible, in various ways and in various places. In I Kings 17, there had not been a drop of rain for an entire year. In desperation, as desperate people often do, evil King Ahab and Queen Jezebel approached the prophet Elijah and asked him what to do. He told them to repent, to change their ways.

The prophet looked in the sky and there was a cloud, at first in the shape of a hand, a great hand across the sky in the form of a cloud, as if coming to bless Israel with life-giving rain.

But clouds do not always bring blessing. There is the 1995 book, *Dark Cloud*, which tells the story of the development of the first atom bomb. It is not a pretty picture, not a good story of the way idealistic scientists were enlisted in producing the most horrible weapon of humanity. And the ways the politicians felt pushed into using the bomb against civilians.

Winston Churchill had looked at the Nazis in Germany, in the 1930's when Germany was considered among the most civilized, sophisticated, and educated in the world and called the sky that he saw, *The Gathering Storm* – a gathering storm to a dark mushroom cloud. All of us, almost 75 years later, have lived under that dark cloud.

Last week, while all attention was on the consumer frenzy of Black Friday and the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, the United States Government released the National Climate Assessment. The report traces the effects climate change has already wrought upon every region of the United States, from nationwide heat waves to dwindling snowpacks in the West. Thirteen federal agencies agree in blunt and disturbing terms, and furthermore, the report envisions the devastation yet to come. Meanwhile, Trump said, “I don’t believe it,” and his billionaire corporate friends deny it. Well, denial or not, the climate assessment gives the facts of climate change on the United States. It is literally and figuratively a massive cloud that is upon us. And it is most emphatically a cloud upon this earth and upon this earth’s poorest people.

Last week, we saw the videos of migrant women and children fleeing in panic from the clouds of tear gas fired at them by U.S. border agents. But the Trump administration praised the Border Patrol for responding “admirably and

responsibly.” I ask, why are clouds of tear gas, tear gas that is out outlawed in war, used on women and children? Why are the clouds of tear gas used on protests and marches and demonstrations always “accepted,” even when children are present? Studies show tear gas can cause health problems with children that will last them the rest of their lives.

We look around us in this world and see clouds, lots of clouds, ominous clouds. Like my grandmother would say squinting toward the northwestern sky, “There’s a cloud coming.”

In Luke, Jesus speaks of a coming cloud, a cloud that will bear “the Son of Man with power and great glory.” What kind of cloud? Will it be good or bad? Will it be one that is promising to give life? Or will it be a dark threatening climate change cloud or a cloud of tear gas trying to silence anyone who dares speak up or speak out?

What do you think the future holds? Elsewhere, Jesus tells us that we, who are accustomed to looking up into the sky, and seeing clouds at morning, know that we will have rain by afternoon. Then he says that we must discern the signs of the times. To pay attention and think about what the future holds. But how can we know what the future holds? At another place, Jesus tells us that, in regard to God’s promised Advent of Christ coming again, we cannot know the hour or the day.

Theologian James F. Kay, in his book, *The Seasons of Grace*, puts it this way:

*If the Gospel is good news, it is not because it predicts a bright, shiny future based on our morality or piety. The Gospel is neither a cocoon that insulates us from the sufferings of this present age nor a pair of ear plugs that shuts out the groaning of creation ... The Gospel is Good News, not because it predicts a future based on our good behavior or other present trends; the Gospel is Good News because it promises a future based on God's faithfulness to Jesus Christ.*

In other words, we look to the future with the hope of Good News because we believe the question is not *when* but *who*. Yale theologian H. Richard Niebuhr said the future or “the end” as he put it, is not so much a matter of chronology but a debate over who, in the end, is in charge. “Eschatology (the doctrine of last things) does not lie in the time-factor so much as the on the God-factor.”

Our hope is grounded in Jesus Christ not in our ability to tame the atom, turn our houses into armed fortresses, or come up with a technological answer to climate change. Jesus, the One who entered into creation to be with us, stands beside us, even through pain, suffering, and death, is the One the scriptures say will come again with clouds of glory. That is why we sang the Advent hymn, this morning, “Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending” and we sing it joyfully, not with foreboding or with a sense of threat. The One who came in the past to love, heal, bind up the broken-hearted is the One who will come again. The glorious and powerful Son of God is also the Suffering Servant who died for us on the cross. It may sound trite but it is true, we do not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future.

Jesus does not say that God causes these ominous clouds. He says that when these things occur we need to look, pay attention, and watch. When the “powers of

the heavens” are shaken, when the “powers of domination” that seek control and rule, are being stretched beyond their breaking point, then we followers of Jesus can see more clearly the in-breaking redemption of Christ Jesus. It’s apocalyptic. It’s an unveiling so we can see what previously we’ve been deluded into not seeing by thinking we were in control.

Part of learning to be a follower of Jesus is learning to look for what theologian William Stringfellow called, “portents of death and signs of the resurrection.” We train our eyes to look for signs of the inbreaking of new life, signs of grace and goodness, signs of justice and peace and mercy and love.

We are a smart, educated congregation and we’re pretty good at seeing the portents of death. But our question is do look for signs of the resurrection? Do we look as followers of Jesus or not? It is easy to look around us and see portents of death: injustice, oppression, destruction of the earth, increasing poverty, guns, and on and on, with the result that we give into despair and hunker down behind our forts and walls. But those of us who follow Christ are called to see differently. We’re looking for something else. We’re training ourselves to look for signs of the resurrection, too. Signs of Christ. Signs of hope.

We live in a world of climate change and injustice and these crises open our eyes to the catastrophe of the old passing away and a new world coming. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:22, “We know that the whole creation is groaning in labor pains... while we wait.” Well, yesterday at Lyric Polley’s funeral at Zion Hill, the 21 year-old single mom who was shot in the head as a bystander in a shooting in a club parking lot, and two weeks ago at the candle-light prayer vigil for her, I heard people groaning for a new world to come.

At the border, in the clouds of tear gas, I hear people groaning and coughing for a new world. In the massive fires out in California with clouds of smoke that can be seen from space, creation is groaning. With incredible drought in some parts of the world and overwhelming flooding in other parts, creation is groaning.

The old world is racist and oppressive, violent, and exploitative. The new world is a radical alternative and those of who follow Jesus, start living in the world to come, now in the present, and we're always looking for it, seeing signs of it, so we can join with it.

The church wants us to remember this the first Sunday of Advent; the first Sunday according to the way the church keeps time. We start off getting our perspective clear, by remembering the goal of all creation is that through Jesus Christ God is making all things new. There is a newness breaking in around us, a new world is coming that we wait for on tiptoes.

So we begin with the ending. And in a way it is both, the old world is dying and the new is being born. The first we saw of this new world was in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Of course, remember that the keepers of the old world, Herod, tried to stop the new being born in Bethlehem by killing all of the baby boys.

Nevertheless, we do not live with fear or resignation or despair. We live with hope. Hope takes work and hope does not come easy. We do not become hopeful by watching TV. Hope is a discipline that we Christians practice and we practice it every Sunday. Hope is practiced every day in prayer, not Facebook or Twitter or Instagram. And we certainly do not hope by being on our own and isolating

ourselves. Hope is not practiced by individuals.

Hope is communal. We learn to be hopeful together and we practice it together. I do not want to over-simplify or trivialize this great truth of the church. Talking about last and ultimate things is no easy matter, especially when most of what we have heard about such matters over the years abuses the scripture and exploits our fears. In the short run, life is tough, full of struggle and battle and hardship. It often looks and feels as if evil will triumph. But together we hear Jesus says, *“Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”* (Luke 21:28).

Our job is to pay attention for the signs of hope, and together get involved in the newness breaking into this old world.

Some years ago during one of hurricanes on the east coast, one of my friends was a PhD student and like many graduate students he and his pregnant wife did not live in the nicest part of town. The hurricane had knocked out all of the power in that part of town for several days. In that part of town, which is not safe after dark when there is electrical power, there were some random looting and robberies.

So when there came a pounding on their front door, they were afraid. They didn't know what to do. Was this a robber? Was this a looter trying to find out if this house was empty? The knocking, pounding continued. What should they do? Sit quietly and still and hope they will go away or make noise so they will know someone is here? Should we go to the door? Finally, with fear and trembling, they looked out into the dark night at the figures on their front steps.

“Heh!” a voice called out to them. “Yall open up. We’ve got ice and drinks and sandwich food and some fresh water, too!”

They recognized the voices and made out the faces of some neighbors from down the street and who attended the same church with them. These neighbors came to bring them wonderful gifts.

Advent means that we pay attention to the gathering clouds. It means to gird our loins, cinch our belts, and organize and mobilize. But Advent most assuredly means that we when we look at the clouds and beyond to the confusing, scary horizon, we look for Jesus Christ and the signs of his coming into this old world. We train our attention to look for the signs of resurrection. The new is coming. Get ready. And get involved in it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.