

The real fear of Advent

Luke 21:20-28

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Sermon preached to the Anglican Community, Saint Paul University (Ottawa, ON)
November 25, 2004
Thursday before Advent 1, Year C

What is it that you fear? I don't mean here those things that students naturally fear at this time of year, papers, exams and the like. What I mean is: what is it that makes you so fearful that it causes you to feel a hardening knot in the depths of your stomach, your body to shudder, your knees to shake, and your legs to give way under you?

I imagine that many of the young soldiers fighting in Iraq have had that experience... on all sides of the conflict. Staring into the darkness, wondering if there is a rifle pointed in your direction.

I have never had that experience, though I have been shot; however, I never even thought about being shot so I wasn't fearful. But I have experienced real fear a few times. Once, when having climbed a mountain and standing at the top, waiting for the fog to clear, I saw the fog lift clear -- as desired -- but only to reveal that I was standing at the very edge of a precipice and that the lower ground that I had left, along with the trees and the lake stretched out before me thousands of feet below me. My legs felt as if they would give way, yet my feet were leaden and I couldn't move, so frozen was I by fear.

For many people, especially those of a past generation, the cause and source of their fear was the sea. Even today, when "humanity may have inflicted countless ecological disasters on the world's oceans" still, "as any commercial fisherman or tanker captain will tell you, man has not yet learned how to subdue the sea's often devastating power". No, "the sea remains steadfast in its ability to obliterate man 's self-made world. Perhaps it is (Herman) Melville who says it best: "[F]or ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder [man], and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make". (N. Philbrick, "Foreward," *American Sea Writing: A Literary Anthology* (ed & introduced by P. Neill; NY: Library of America, 2000) xvi-xvii.)

The sea, the mountains, wars that rage ... each of these and so many other occasions of real fear remind us that no matter how much we like to think of ourselves as in control, there is that out there that can snuff out our existence no matter how valiantly we fight to control it.

I imagine that these are strange words in a university, especially a contemporary university. After all, the university of today is oriented towards one goal, gaining critical mastery. Whether your area of study be the design of cars or the design of pharmaceuticals, the making of peace or the making of war, the study of Shakespeare or of the books of the Bible, your goal is to understand and to master. Fear, overwhelming fear, is not anywhere part of the University curriculum, and in effect, we have sought to banish it so as to make for what we call a "safe learning environment".

I imagine as well that my words will be perceived as strange in a liberal culture, a culture in which what we desire most is that hope expressed so weakly by Rodney King after the Los Angeles riots of some years back, but also implicit in so many weak Anglican prayers, our hope that we might all just get along. The liberal culture mocks the sales of the "Left Behind" series and mocks the anger of bishops in the developing world who announce the imminent fall of the West and its church in terms similar to those that fourth century theologians used to announce the imminent fall of Rome or that first century theologians used to announce the fall of Jerusalem. We mock because, as masters of our destiny, what have we to fear, we who have successfully banished fear from our lives? *(Of course such proclamations can be abused, but so can ignorance of them.)*

The great German Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, came forth from both of these worlds in the early 20th century. Barth was a product of the pinnacle of Western learning, the Austro-Hungarian-German university system that thought that it had mastered the known world. Barth was also the product of a liberal culture that was a model and magnet for progressive intellectuals from around the world, yet a culture that had been prophetically informed by Nietzsche just a few years earlier that its God no longer existed, a culture that would soon produce one of the greatest demons of the 20th century, the National Socialist party of Germany.

But Barth found himself overwhelmed by a God who had not abandoned the world, even if the immediate world around him, the very best that the world could offer, had abandoned God. This God broke through the walls that man at his best had erected. (Women had not yet had a sufficient chance to erect their barriers. That would come later!)

Where Barth found this God breaking through and overwhelming him was in the small apocalyptic community of Bad Boll, a community of pietists founded by the Blumhardts, father and son, a community dedicated to holiness of life and justice in action -- two pillars of Scriptural teaching that God has joined together but many seem regularly to want to rend asunder.

It was at Bad Boll that Barth experienced first hand the exorcism of demons from a young girl. It was there that he found himself in the fearful presence of the living God, weak kneed, legs collapsing under him. It was there that Barth, for all his University learning and his great Swiss German culture, learned of the still powerful, still out-of-our-control, still fearful God who could not be mastered and manipulated by man, anymore than the wildness of the sea can be, who could destroy and who could make alive.

It was this experience that impelled him to become not just a good theologian, but perhaps the greatest theologian of the 20th century. It is telling that most of you here in this Faculty of Theology probably don't even know this about Barth, so effective has the university culture been at causing us to believe that mastery is what theology, too, is about, so effective has the attempt to banish fear from our controlled and controlling liberal culture.

My friends, you and I are coming to that 'most wonderful time of the year', that 'holly jolly', 'deck the halls' time 'with boughs of holly' time... Advent, followed by Christmas. You will be encouraged to show a little Christmas spirit, to laugh, to be bright in the darkness that descends at this time of year. Far be it from me to cast a pall over the proceedings since I am as interested, as you are, in enjoying this time.

But, the biblical readings of this period of the year are strangely dissonant with the music and decorations. They should give us pause, even if only once a week, especially those of us who are charged with bringing the living Word of God to the people of God.

May I suggest to you that, in light of the fearsome preaching of the Baptist, who will remind us that the axe of God is laid to the root of the tree of unrighteousness and unholy ritual, and whose power will fall on Jerusalem, which has become Babylon and which, like Babylon, **will** fall ...

May I suggest to you that, in light of the song of Jesus' mother, blessed by Elizabeth with words formerly used to bless Jael and Judith, both of whom caused Gentile kings to fall dead at their feet, either with a well-aimed nail in the temple or sword at the throat, Mary, whose song proclaims the overturning not only of nations but also of institutions and cultures that fail to heed God...

May I suggest to you who will sing with me the great words of Wesley's hymn that every eye will behold him who was pierced and that there will be deep wailing at **some** place and in **some** time but that there indeed **shall** be such a place and time ...

May I suggest to you that this is indeed a season to fear in a way that **our** knees **should** give way **if** we truly have seen and understood that we are as far from being masters of our fate as we are from telling the sea to cease its raging? May I suggest to you that this a time of year when the readings suggest that our little boat may just not make it to shore?

And may I suggest that once we have truly feared and had those fears confirmed ... once you have felt the bullet rip your body apart, or fallen from the precipice, or been plunged beneath the wild waves of the sea, and you are sinking, sinking, sinking beneath waves that you cannot control, and you have drowned -- which in Greek is called "baptizo" -- and there is no hope in you ... that then and then alone will you know that your redemption is nigh. For then and then alone will you feel a hand stretch forth -- even in death -- to bring you up out of the waters of the whelming sea, not as the one you were, but who you will be, freed to be for all eternity in the presence of our Lord.

Liberal, university students -- and I include myself: You can no more deny the fearsome power of God to destroy the unholiness and injustice of men and women, the barriers that they set up to hold the people of God captive and the fearsome power of God to save His people from their captors, than you can the power of the sea in your small barque. God will not be mocked: He is coming and He will fearsomely destroy evil.

But, He will never fail to come to the aid of His people. He is still strong to save. And He will. On that, we have His guarantee by the blood of the cross and by the Spirit that He has given to those who faithfully serve Him.

Fear of the Lord may not be on the University curriculum and you will rarely, if ever, hear it promoted in a liberal society, but it is still the beginning of true wisdom and the end of our salvation.

NOTE:

(1) *The supposed identification of "Babylon" in the book of Revelation with Rome has often run up against the fact that "Babylon" in the apocalyptic section of the Gospels (e.g., Lk 21) is almost universally agreed to mean Jerusalem. For perspectives on "Babylon" in Revelation as a symbol for Jerusalem, not Rome, see J. W. Marshall, Parables of War: Reading John's Jewish Apocalypse (Studies in Christianity and Judaism; Waterloo, Ont.: Published for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion by Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001). It is likely that the ascription "Babylon" is used of Jerusalem AND of Rome, as it is also used of other cities and nations that challenge the sovereignty of God.*

(2) *Karl Barth's own recounting of the impact of his experience at Bad Boll, along with some of the words of Christoph Blumhardt, are found in K. Barth, C. Blumhardt and N. Society of Brothers, Action in Waiting, trans. N. Society of Brothers (Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Pub. House, 1969).*