

Over and Over

Luke 21: 25-36

Home Moravian Church, December 1, 2024

Let me share a story that I find inspiring. It's not a Bible story, but a tale from Mark Twain called "Jim Baker's Blue Jay Yarn." I wish I could read it to you, because only Twain can really tell it, but here's the gist: A blue jay lands on the roof of an abandoned house, and in that roof he sees a knot-hole. He examines it carefully, declares it a "perfectly elegant hole," gets an acorn, and drops it in. He waits to hear it land—and hears nothing. Disappointed, he tries again—and again. After many efforts, he says to the hole: "Well, you're a long hole, and a deep hole, and a mighty singular hole altogether—but I've started to fill you and I'm [darned—Twain doesn't say 'darned'] if I *won't* fill you, if it takes a hundred years!"

For hours, the jay flies back and forth with acorns; but at last, having failed even to hear an acorn hit bottom, he collapses against the chimney of the house, swearing as only a jay can swear. One by one, other blue jays gather around to discuss the situation. Finally, one wise old jay flies down to the door of the old house, which is standing open. He looks in and sees the acorns scattered all over the floor; and he cries, "Come here, everybody: hang'd if this fool hasn't been trying to fill up a house with acorns!" The other jays swoop down for a look, hang around laughing for an hour, and for the next few years blue jays and other birds come by to visit the house themselves and have a good laugh over it. Only one old owl, who stops by on his way back from Yosemite, said he couldn't see anything funny in it; but as Twain says, "he was a good deal disappointed about Yosemite, too."

Now, Twain wasn't one to moralize and he hated cheap sentimentality, but since he's not here I'm going to borrow his story to make this point: Doing good in the world can be something like trying to fill up a house with acorns. Drop as many good deeds as we will down the hole before us: we will never fill up the house or even hear them land. Sometimes we can feel that everything we do is simply part of the over-and-overness of life, which itself can overwhelm us, day leading to day and season to season. First it's January, then February, then all of a sudden it's almost Christmas--and then the calendar just starts over, giving us plenty to schedule but no context whatsoever for what it means just to get from January to January.

Fortunately, for context we have the church year. Beginning today with the first Sunday in Advent, the church year tells a story that starts with anticipation of Christ's coming and ends with his rise to his heavenly throne. Within that context, our lives are transformed: Not just a series of events happening over and over, but a meaningful contribution within the divine story.

But if the church year begins in anticipation, then Jesus' words in Luke 21 are unsettling, because what *he* anticipates is disaster. Just before the verses we're reading today, he foretells the destruction of the Temple, followed by wars, famines, plagues, persecutions, and finally the horrible end of the city of Jerusalem. And then—reaching the verses you just heard me read—will come signs in the heavens, chaos like a storm at sea, fear and foreboding and fainting.

Over centuries, these texts have inspired a lot of speculation about the so-called end time. The basis for that speculation is a question from Jesus' followers: *When, Lord?* When will these things happen, and what are the signs? Always some would-be prophet is moving Jesus' words out of their context and into the calendar, matching them up to events in history or the present to come up with an answer. And this type of prophet *always* finds an answer. Because in this

world, anyone looking for wars, insurrections, plagues, famines, and persecutions can always find them.

And so we come to Advent—a season that begins in darkness. The darkness of a world where daily life often feels like a repeating series of wars, famines, plagues, and persecutions. Not to mention the abuse of power and the prevalence of greed—themes of many of the stories preceding this text in Luke. Advent anticipates the coming of Christ to bring us *out* of all that. Lighting our first candle today symbolizes our first tentative step out of darkness.

We are, however, going to need a lot of encouragement to move forward. So in today's verses Jesus ends with a grand vision of triumph to come: after chaos and fear and the shaking of the heavenly powers will come a vision of the Son of Man, "coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Then, says Jesus, "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

But. *But*. All those predictions of the end of the world, all those would-be prophets calculating dates for the return of Christ: none of them have been right, and here we still are—with wars, famines, plagues, and persecutions coming again and again in repeated series, like a calendar that just keeps returning to the beginning, over and over. Like a calendar and not like a story, because in a story, the end would come. Will it ever come? Where are the signs of redemption?

Looking around today, what we see instead is even more war, even more famine, even more darkness. If we can't see redemption coming, well, in the midst of wars, famines, plagues, and persecutions, we'd be satisfied with just getting back to normal. "Lord, when will we get back to *normal*?"

But the Advent promise is not that the world will return to normal. Think of what it says in the book of Isaiah: “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid ... and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.” The coming of God’s kingdom will not get things back to *normal*; it will turn them upside down. Our hope, as we wait for the coming of the Kingdom, should not be for things to get back to normal, but for them to get radically different.

And yet, hope as we may, the terrors that Jesus described keep happening over and over, reliably as the passing of the seasons, or the coming of night. If we are not to know when these terrors will end, then, Lord, give us some guidance on how to live meaningfully in an ongoing series of repeating, and even escalating, terrible events.

When a text is as challenging as today’s reading, it’s often helpful to read it in a larger context. What’s going on in the previous chapters? Here’s where things get interesting. Between the stories about power and greed and today’s text about destruction and signs, here’s what happens:

Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

Just as his followers were about to throw themselves into a search for signs of destruction and darkness, Jesus pointed out another kind of sign altogether.

If we’re looking for signs of redemption, *this* is where we should focus: on acts of faithfulness, acts of generosity, acts of love arising from the love of God. Every such act is a

sign of God's triumph, a sign that God triumphs even now. We should not only be looking for those signs, but creating them.

But our good deeds, our acts of love, are so small—aren't they? We've just been doing them over and over and they don't seem to make a difference. Do we really have the capacity to create signs of redemption?

More than a dozen years ago, I found inspiration in "Jim Baker's Blue Jay Yarn." Working as a chaplain at Baptist Hospital, I saw a parallel between my work and the blue jay's. No matter how many visits I made, how many patients I talked to, how many prayers I prayed, in that huge hospital each act amounted to no more than an acorn dropped into a knothole. I was never going to fill up the house. And instead of discouraging me, that realization set me free. The very impossibility set me free. I was free to do my work with joy, because I was free from the illusion that if I just worked harder I'd meet everybody's needs. I was not called to fill up the house. I was just called to keep winging in the acorns—all that I had.

When the widow dropped in her two copper coins, how many people laughed? "Come here, everybody: hang'd if this little lady isn't trying to fill up the Temple treasury with two sorry little coins!" But maybe the impossibility set her free. Free to offer this act of faithfulness, to which we should pay attention: because every act of faithfulness is a sign that God's redemption is ongoing, and that the story ends in triumph.

In the last verses of today's text, Jesus says, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and worries of this life." In other words: *be not normal!* Dissipation, drunkenness, worry—these are normal reactions when bad stuff just seems to keep happening over and over. But Jesus calls us to *be not normal*. To keep joyfully throwing in our acorns or our little copper coins, not because we can fill up the world, but

because it gives us joy to throw in what we have. Maybe in this present age, our small acts of faithfulness are all the sign the world will ever see that the story ends in triumph.

Winging in an acorn, tossing in a little coin, lighting a single candle: We perform these acts within the context of the divine story—that story we retell in the church year, over and over. Christ is born again and again, lives again and again, dies again and again, is resurrected again and again. We tell this story to tell the world that whatever the times of our lives, whatever the signs of our times, everyone who has ever lived and will live is held within this divine story of God's love; and God's love rises in the person of Christ to triumph, over and over. Amen.