

Finding Peace in a VUCA World (1): Read the Signs

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Text: Luke 21:25-36

Time's swift passage was marked in my family by my father's annual rant: "Seems like all we ever do is put up the Christmas tree and take down the Christmas tree." (He used the term "we" quite loosely—once he had wrestled the tree into its stand, he and my brothers pretty much headed to the family room to find a televised football game, leaving the actual decorating to my mother and sisters and I) Maybe he was simply acknowledging just how fast the year had flown by, but I wonder if he said it with just a tinge of weariness, a sense that we did a lot of the same-old, same-old again and again and again.

For better or worse, we begin the cycle anew today, the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year. Like preparing for Christmas, we'll do many of the same things we always do: light candles, put on the children's pageant, collect needed gifts for underprivileged individuals and families, and sigh with relief on Christmas Eve when the sanctuary illuminated only with the tiny flames of hundreds of candles echoes with the hushed sounds of "silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright. . . sleep in heavenly peace."

Until then, however, we'll most likely get precious little sleep. We'll find it difficult to find 10 minutes to read each day's devotional written by Fairmount members. The organized among us will work down the "to do" list with frightening calm, while others of us will grow increasingly frantic. Our busyness keeps us from wondering whether any of these preparations really matter, but maybe the shining Christmas moment makes it worth the effort. Here, barely into Advent, I'm not going to question that assumption (at least not until John the Baptist joins us for the next two weeks). At the very least I think we break our necks to get Christmas right because it provides such a refreshing contrast to our lives the rest of the year. The speed of change in our world and the changes themselves make us long for tradition and familiarity. The lack of predictability in an age of terrorism produces deep insecurity and a sense that we're not in control. What does it mean to live every day at an "orange alert" level? We feel unable to keep up with exponentially-increasing knowledge, and under constant bombardment with information--- and the complexity of reality makes much of it seem

chaotic and unordered, with more room to be misread. Values and institutions we once took for granted have disappeared or been reconstructed as to be almost unrecognizable. These dynamics so dominate the contemporary post-modern landscape that they've been given an acronym: VUCA, referring to the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of life today. The term was first coined by the United States military in the 1990s but has been used since to shape strategic planning in everything from business to education to non-profits [from *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*]. How can an organization function successfully within a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous culture? Is it even possible to find peace in a VUCA world????!

That's the question I propose we explore this Advent season. Reading the same old texts through this lens may yield surprising new insights that will help us counter a VUCA world with purpose and joy. Actually I'm confident we will, not because of my preaching but because of God's faithfulness *to all generations*—even our own! God sent Jesus into the world (which has always had some VUCA qualities about it) to give people life –and not just so-so life, but abundant life.

We begin this exploration with a text heavy with apocalypse and doomsday warnings. They are attributed to Jesus close to the end of his earthly ministry, but many biblical scholars believe the early church re-purposed ancient prophecies in light of the destruction of the temple by the ruling Roman empire in 70 AD. Where is hope when the world as you know it is coming down around you? Here at the beginning of Advent we are challenged to read the signs. Listen for God's Word in the gospel of Luke, the 21st chapter at the 25th verse.
[Luke 21:25-36]

NASA has recently posted several Web site announcements and a You Tube video assuring everyone that the world is not ending on December 21, 2012. That's the current prediction cited by some because it marks the conclusion of a Long Count period, or 25,000 year cycle according to the Mayan calendar. What makes this remarkable is that in the past, the scientific community hasn't responded to such apocalyptic forecasts, but the doomsday buzz generated by the release of the new movie "2012" prompted them to do so in hopes that accurate information from trusted experts would keep the end-of-the-world rumors from spreading.

"I get angry at the way people are being manipulated and frightened to make money," one NASA research scientist fumed. He added that if you want to

worry, think about global climate change or nuclear war instead. [from the *New York Times, Science Times, November 17, 2009 and Medill News Service*]
Whew! That'll reduce stress.

The furor reminds me of the popularity a decade ago over the best-selling *Left Behind* series which purported to offer a biblical perspective on the end of the world, connecting current events and persons to these apocalyptic writings. I found the biblical literalism and overt political agenda of the series off-putting to the max, but it did make one important point: history is not a carousel ride—an endless cycle of life and death, beginning and end, going around and around in circles. Instead, history is an arc and for people of faith, God is in its trajectory, actively present and working to bring out of creation God's eternal Kingdom—a reality of wholeness, peace and abundant life for all. There is purpose built in to the very fiber of reality---volatile, ambiguous, and chaotic though it may seem.

The apocalyptic vision in Scripture—including today's text---connects the end of human history with the culmination of God's Kingdom. The signs of that emerging Kingdom are described in ominous tones: there will be distress and confusion among the nations; people will be gripped by fear and foreboding; even the very foundations of the world will be shaken. This tumult will herald the coming of the "Son of Man"---a name long-identified as the One God will send to judge and save the world. Some religious traditions read all of this quite literally and point to cataclysms both natural and human-induced as proof that we are indeed in the last times. The problem with that reading to my mind is how to distinguish apocalypse now from among the violence and struggle that are so deeply imbedded in human history. War and rumors of war aren't the notable exception—they're the rule. Earthquakes and tsunamis shake the foundations of earth with devastating effect, but we understand them as natural phenomena, not divine judgment.

The gospel writer has another idea about how to read the signs. The focus is on perceiving God's presence throughout human history as having a redemptive goal. In a word, to have hope. But hope in this sense is not naïve optimism. Neither is it the promise of "pie in the sky, by and bye." Instead, Christian hope is cultivated by two advents: the birth of Jesus who showed us the heart of God, and the promised return of Christ whose Kingdom will have no end. We watch and wait with a deep conviction that even in the darkest night -amid global disasters and in personal tragedy—there are life-giving impulses afoot. God is near.

This picture of the future calls followers of Jesus to a particular way of life. It is a kind of “living in between the times”---fully invested in every present moment which passes away in the twinkling of an eye, because we trust in a future moment that will endure forever. We receive today as a gift and pray for the strength to live fully and faithfully within it—alert for God’s presence, even in the same-old, same-old. We live in the reality of the present by virtue of God’s promise for the future.

Stand up and raise your head! the gospel writer declares. There is hope because God’s kingdom is coming. Our daily actions and decisions matter, as they make room for that kingdom.

The first readers of Luke’s gospel found themselves in a fearful, chaotic time, when their lives were threatened and their future was uncertain. In dramatically different, but no less sharpened ways, we face similar challenges in a world of discontent. There seems precious little objective data to warrant optimism about the future.

Amazingly, graciously, Jesus points toward hope. There’s no denying the reality of suffering. His own death confirms the consequences born of human choices and actions. But through the eyes of faith, we may come to see these sufferings not as death throes, but as labor; an end of one thing, but the beginning of another. Looking at it this way gives new meaning to the same old things, the same old work, the same old mission, the same old people. . . .even the same old Christmas tree-trimming. The fact is, trust in a good future will free us to take on bold new enterprises! We are God’s midwives, helping birth God’s Kingdom in this place, in this time.

The season of Advent celebrates hope that is born again and again into our lives. Hope embodied in a person, who came and transformed human history, who comes today to give direction and strength, and who will come again to finish what God started.

Even when it is winter in your heart, the green buds of spring are forming. New life is God’s promise to a VUCA world. May this season be one in which we prepare not only for the arrival of the baby Jesus, but for the Christ who rules the world with truth and grace. AMEN.