

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 12.2.18, Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10, I Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

Sermon Resources:

<http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2015/07/year-c-first-sunday-of-advent-november.html>

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1

Sharon Ringe, "Luke"

<http://preachershusband.blogspot.com/2011/02/ministry-beyond-decorative.html>

I'm sure you've heard this before, but one of the challenges for the church is that the rest of the country finishes Thanksgiving, and if they haven't already, they put away the leftovers and immediately barrel into Christmas, with all the songs and lights and joy; while the Church is over here in Advent, which, at least in the beginning, isn't so much about the joy, or the lights or the happy songs. In fact, parts of today's passages for the first Sunday of Advent are downright terrifying: "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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." I don't know about you, but that's not the theme of any holly, jolly Christmas song I've ever heard.

So, the rest of the world is trying to celebrate Christmas, and we're still in Advent, with these kind of scary passages, and it's normally a challenge. But, it might be less of a challenge this year, because these Advent passages are talking about facing troubles and troubled times. Jesus, like I just read, tells the disciples about what may be coming, signs in the heavens, distress on the earth, nations confused, fear and foreboding, a great shaking-up of everything. And his isn't the only situation like that. Jeremiah is speaking to people who, in the words of one commentator, "feel like a great dead stump", who feel like rotting and collapse. The

psalmist's troubles are a little more personal, but troubles nonetheless—enemies exulting over them, and their own sinfulness to grapple with. And Paul, as he writes to the Thessalonians, is concerned about their faith and holiness, as part of the greater concerns of the Thessalonians, worries over what happens when you die, and persecution, and fear. All of our passages speak to people facing troubles and troubled times.

And that's why I say it might be less of a challenge this year for us to be so different, because lots of people right now face troubles and troubled times, lots of people are fearful and worried, lots of us are wrestling with sin and how to view our enemies, lots of us in this season feel like a great dead stump, lots of us in our nation and in our world, see terrible things happening, distress on the earth, nations confused, fear and foreboding, it feels like everything is being shaken up. So, this year our Advent practice may seem more right than all of that holly jolliness of Christmas.

And as they face those fears, worries, distress and foreboding, when facing troubles and troubled times, Paul writes to the Thessalonians that he wants to restore what is lacking in their faith, and pray for God to strengthen their hearts. Because in the face of all this trouble, they will need restored faith and strong hearts. As Jesus says, “pray that you may have the strength to escape all these things and to stand before the Son of Man”, other people may faint, but disciples are to stand up and lift up their heads, so to do that we will need restored faith and God-strengthened hearts.

And in order for that to happen we have to go back to the basics. God describes, through Jeremiah, what Israel's people will receive in the face of their troubles—a righteous branch sprouting up, starting again. Jesus compares it to buds forming on a fig tree, starting again. He also describes shaking the heavens

and the earth. A new branch, a new bud on the tree, shaking things up, these are the beginning of restored faith and God-strengthened hearts.

Now, the shaking-up might not seem like starting over, but this type of description is called “apocalyptic”, and probably that word is familiar to you, but maybe not really what it means. In Greek, “apocalyptic” refers to revealing, the book of revelation in Greek is called “the apocalypse of John”, that is, the revelation. When Jesus talks about things being shaken up, it’s as part of this apocalypse, this revealing, that things will be shaken up in order to reveal what was underneath, to reveal what was before, to take things back to the basics, to peel the layers off, to start anew, so something new can grow. Like a branch springing up. Like buds on a tree.

We face and will continue to face, a world of trouble, of fear, of foreboding, of distress. We will need our faith restored and our hearts strengthened. So to do that, we need to go through apocalypse, that is we need things to be shaken up, revealed, brought back to the basics, so we can start anew.

When you’re learning to read, you learn the alphabet. Because those are the basics, the beginning of bigger words, the building blocks of language. And our Psalm today, Psalm 25, is an example of that. You wouldn’t know it from our English translation, but in Hebrew, Psalm 25 is an acrostic, based on the Hebrew alphabet, that is each line begins in alphabetical order with a letter of the alphabet. It made it an easy way to learn and remember the Psalm, because it follows the alphabet, it goes back to the basics.

And in the Psalm, the writer refers to God as a teacher, the psalmist wants to be taught God’s ways. The Psalmist wants, as one commentator says “A refresher course in” God’s ways.

When we are faced with troubles and troubling times, when we feel distress and foreboding, and could faint with fear, when our faith needs to be restored and

our hearts need to be strengthened, then perhaps we are due for a refresher course in God's ways, perhaps we need to go back to the basics, to our ABCs, and remind ourselves and be reminded of those things which will strengthen us and restore us. Perhaps we need to be willing to start over again and come to God as a teacher, to go back to the basics.

I took piano lessons for many years, and the longer I took, the easier it was to sit down and learn a piece very quickly. But even so, in my later years of lessons, sometimes I would have worked and worked on a piece, several weeks perhaps, and still would be stumbling over a certain part or my fingering kept getting muddled or I would consistently miss the same notes. And my teacher would tell me to go back to the beginning, and take the piece apart and play it through part by part and only adding in parts when I had a handle on the first sections. I did not want to do that, that would be like starting over. I just wanted to play the piece. Surely if I just kept banging away at the piano, it would sort itself out? No. My teacher was always right, I needed to go back to the basics, I needed to start over and take it part by part, section by section, chord by chord, until I could put it together. She wanted me to play the piece, too, but to do that I would need to go back to the beginning, back to the basics, to start anew.

That is true of many things. Writer Shauna Niequist talks about how, after years and years of cooking, of being interested in food and chefs and techniques, she signed up for a weeklong cooking boot camp, thinking it would be the next level in her cooking, and was astonished at how much time they spend perfecting their chopping technique and learning about salt and butter and heat, all things that seemed basic to her, but then she realized, she hadn't really mastered them, she had kind of been muddling through with partial skills, and that the review renewed her love of cooking.

Perhaps all of this shaking up, this fear and distress, is a catalyst for us to go back to the basics, to start over and re-learn the things which will enable us to lift our heads and restore our faith. To go back to the basics, the beginning, to start anew isn't always failure, sometimes it is new growth.

Of course, we don't have to do this. In a time of fear and trouble, in a world of distress and shaking up, we could hold on to things that are crumbling, or keeping our heads down, or decide that a partial faith and weak heart are enough to get by. We could keep things covered up, and unexamined. We could keep adding in complications and details and nuances to cover things and make them look better on the surface. We could keep holding on to all the layers of our preconceived notions and self-righteousness and prejudices and the things we've done to each other. We could stick to how we've always done it before, keep going the way we have been.

Because the shaking up can be scary, and the new branch takes a while to grow. Restored faith and strengthened hearts don't happen over night. And it might seem like a waste of time when we just want to get on with it, when we have so much distressing news to face and absorb, let's just keep going with what we have, even if it's not gonna to help us stand or lift up our heads, even if it keeps us from learning and growing.

Going back to the basics will not be easy or quick. Writer Derek Paul describes his wife gutting their bathroom once she discovered some mold behind a loose tile, and he says: "Thinking about it, I have to acknowledge the theological and practical truth that Rebekah's approach reveals. The bottom line, for her, is "Deal with it" over "Look good" every time. Never-ever cover up anything that needs fixing, and that applies most especially to the things that grow in dark places. Rumors, gossip, innuendo, assumptions... rot... mold. The principle remains the same... We don't patch over problems, but clean things out and start over if

that's what it takes...[She] doesn't play games, or dress things up to look nice when they're not...And that's all right because eventually - if you simply fix the cosmetics on top of the mold - instead of a solid, functional structure/bathroom/church, there's going to be a fragile shell with a lot of nasty gunk underneath. That might look good on the surface, but it's got nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. And that's not ministry - that's decorating.”

Going back to the basics will shake us up, shake us down to the core, reveal the messy, broken, troubling things we’ve gotten accustomed to. So, like bathroom mold, we might have to go through the process of starting over and cleaning things out first. It will be like trying to remove an invasive plant, that we can’t just trim a little bit and have it look better, you have to dig up the whole root system, going back to the beginning, starting again. It isn’t going to be sweet and nice, it will be like shaking the heavens and the earth, like big strange signs and roaring waves, like the long slow process of branches sprouting up and buds becoming leaves, like sitting down and learning our ABCs all over again.

My seminary president tells a story about his wife and daughter, where once his daughter was told she could not go out with her friends until her room was clean. So, of course, she just took everything off the floor and stuffed it into drawers and closets and under the bed, so the room looked clean. But her mother, as parents do, went to actually check that it was clean, and discovered all of this, and said, “You can’t just hide your mess! I’m not settling for less than complete transformation!”

That’s what Jesus is saying to the disciples, that the world won’t settle for less than complete transformation. That’s what the psalmist wants to learn, complete transformation. Because the world is troubled and troubling, because so much has been fixed to look nice on the surface but is distressing underneath, because in order to face this revelation we will need restored faith and strong hearts, we will

need complete transformation. And for complete transformation, we have to go back to the basics, to the ABCs of faith, we have to be willing to sit down, and clean things out, and start over again.

And it's not just basics like memorize verses or recite catechisms. It's back to the basics of no matter what rules and regulations say, what does the Lord say about justice for the oppressed, back to the basics of no matter what we've always done before, what does righteousness look like as merciful people? It's back to the basics of salvation which makes us whole, instead of judgmental and love which makes us welcoming, instead of insular. It's back to the basics of being humble and faithful, back to the basics of God's covenant and decrees, back to the basics of pursuing holiness and watching for our redemption.

Some of that is going to require pretty basic things. We will need to know the bible better, and that means reading it and reading it more, studying it, questioning it, learning it. It will mean pursuing deeper practices of prayer, so we can hear what new things God is saying to us, it will mean further commitment to worship, even though there are lots of other demands on our time, it will mean choosing to educate ourselves about everything that we've covered up, about the prejudices we carry. It will mean pursuing connection with people who shake us up and challenge our preconceived notions. It will mean commitment to fellowship, especially with people with whom we disagree. It will mean asking questions instead of assuming the worst, and examining different viewpoints instead of sticking to the same old opinions.

We will have to go back to the basics, so that we can be transformed, so that our faith can be restored and our hearts strengthened, so that we can lift up our heads and watch for our redemption, so that we can see the buds growing even in our distress, so that we can watch the branch rising up, even in our fear, so that we can stand in the better world which will be revealed.

Friends, I pray that our faith will be restored and the Lord will strengthen our hearts. Let's pray for that for ourselves and one another. Let's pursue it, so that we can lift up our heads and stand in the face of this troubled and troubling world. Let's be willing to go back to the beginning, back to the basics, so we can learn what the Lord has to teach us. Let's be willing to be shaken up and see what is revealed. Let's be willing to address what we had once covered up, to clean it out and start over again. Let's be people who do not settle for less than complete transformation, of ourselves, of the world around us. Let's go back to the basics, let's be strengthened in our faith and in our hearts, and let's stand up and lift up our heads in the most troubling times, and hope for a redemption which is drawing near. Amen.