

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“I’m Not Ready”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
Advent 1—December 2, 2018

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

I’m not ready. Truth be told I am not ever really ready for the beginning of the season of Advent. How did it get to be December already?! I’m not ready. Today actually is the first day of the Christian calendar so we can be wishing each other “happy new year!” We can also wish a Happy Hanukkah” to our Jewish sisters and brothers because that begins today—tonight to be precise—too. I’m still not ready. I need some time in silence. I need time to listen. I need some family time baking together, decorating together and telling stories and maybe reading aloud, but I’m not ready today. I’m especially not ready to hear that “It’s the most wonderful time of the year” because for too many people it isn’t.

In California our neighbors are still dealing with the destruction from the fires there. Children are still separated from their parents at our Southern border, and others, with them, are held in detention centers, surrounded by fences. Too many people in this extraordinary country of ours will go to bed hungry tonight. Farther afield, countless numbers of people are suffering in Yemen, in Syria, in Afghanistan, in too many places. I’m not ready.

At a much more personal level, I know many people facing this holiday with difficulty because of illness or the loss of a job or a relationship, or because a very special loved one will not be present this year. They would understand the words written by Jim Wallis after the death of his father several years ago: “People ask me how I’m doing. The truthful answer? Not well, and I’m not even going to try to “get over” this. He deserves to be grieved well, and I will be grieving him for some time – in ways, for the rest of my life. But with the grief, there is also profound gratitude for the legacy that his children, grandchildren, and the countless people whose lives he touched will be blessed with forever.” The most wonderful time of the year? You don’t have to be a scrooge to question that statement. We know what it is to be in distress.

Frankly, ours is a time when we can understand the words from the passage today in Luke: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the 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.” That sounds a little like today.

Professor Tom Troeger says that in the beginning God’s word “hammered out clearly defined boundaries: heaven and earth, night and day, land and water. Creation was secure and dependable.” Yet our passage today from Luke reverses that process. “Everything solid starts coming loose. It is like a movie running backwards. Signs appear in the sun, the moon and the stars. The chaos monster of the deep, conquered in Genesis, appears to be stirring to life once again in the roaring of the sea and the waves. The nations are confused by the vast, oceanic commotion. Instead of order and delight, there is fear and foreboding. Not even the changeless skies that arch over our earthly home are secure, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Everything solid is coming loose.”<sup>1</sup>

When that happens, the most common human reaction is to run and hide, to take refuge, to pull the covers up over our heads, to do whatever we need to do to survive. But listen to the response Luke urges upon his readers: “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Troeger, *Lectionary Homiletics*, December 3, 2000

heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” So much that we thought to be solid and dependable has shifted and in the midst of all that change, we are invited not to hide but to stand tall because our redemption is drawing near. Stand tall because when creation breaks loose, that so often is the time when God empowers us to do great things. The great African Saint Augustine once suggested that Christians are not distinguished from others by the trials they suffer, but by the way they suffer their trials. Stand tall and look ahead to what God can do. Stand tall in distress because God is faithful. Stand tall because God is good all the time. Stand tall because God’s promises are always more reliable than any present distress. Stand tall.

Back in the midst of the Second World War, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon titled: *A Great Time to be Alive*. The world was in a terrible state. Hitler’s Germany was busy taking over Europe, bombing treasures like Coventry, and murdering the Jews. On our side we were busy bombing Dresden and on both sides countless numbers of people were being killed. It was a terrible time. Yet Fosdick proclaimed that it was a great time to be alive, because in times like that, when the world is “swept by a tide of savagery” we have the opportunity, like no other time, to show the world what faithful living looks like. What do we call those who fought in that war and lived through that time? The greatest generation. It was an awful time and it was a great time to be alive. When the heavens are shaken, lift up your heads.

Fosdick uses Thomas Jefferson as an example of this kind of living. What kind of an era did Jefferson live in? “He thought it appalling. The gains of civilization thrown away, he saw in the early nineteenth century a dismaying renaissance of primitive barbarism: ‘Those moral principles and conventional usages,’ he wrote, ‘which have heretofore been the bond of civilized nations,...have given way to force, the law of Barbarians, and the nineteenth century dawns with the vandalism of the fifth.’ Yet, looked at now in retrospect, what kind of generation was it in which Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Marshall and their colleagues lived? We glory in it! It offered them no ease; it demanded of them adequacy, and, rising to meet it, they made of it a great time.”<sup>2</sup> It is a great time to be alive, we can stand tall in this current distress, because when the heavens are shaking and the earth is quaking, we get driven back to our fundamentals: fundamentals of justice, of hospitality, of love. It is a great time to be alive because when the world is solid, there are no windows through which hope can shine, no doors that can lead to a transformed creation, no space for a righteous branch to spring up. Stand tall in distressing times because God is even now at work in our world making it what it will yet be. How might we be a part of that work?

Ann Weems offers a challenge to all of us who know that this is not the most wonderful time of the year in her poem, *Not Celebrate?*

Not celebrate?

Your burden is too great to bear?

Your loneliness is intensified during this Christmas season?

Your tears seem to have no end?

Not celebrate?

You should lead the celebration!

You should run through the streets

to ring the bells and sing the loudest!

You should fling tinsel on the tree,

and open your house to your neighbors,

and call them in to dance!

For it is you above all others

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<sup>2</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Great Time to Be Alive* Harper & Brothers © 1944

who know the joy of Advent.  
It is unto you that a Savior is born this day,  
One who comes to lift your burden from your shoulders,  
One who comes to wipe the tears from your eyes.  
You are not alone,  
for he is born this day to you.<sup>3</sup>

I'm not ready but this season is precisely for those of us who aren't ready because God doesn't wait for us to get ready. God is already at work. In times like these, our call is to stand tall, to pay attention, to be alert, to keep our eyes open for signs of God's in-breaking, that we might be ready for the time when God makes all things new. Advent is not only about looking back and celebrating a birth of long ago. It is also about looking forward to a future God is even now redeeming. I may not be ready but God is. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: Gracious God, in times of distress and turmoil, give us vision, wisdom and courage that we might stand tall in the strength of your presence and promise. Through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. The Westminster Press. © 1980