

Stillness

Advent 2 - December 2nd, 2021

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

David Lewicki, preaching

21:25 "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.

21:26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

21:27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.

21:28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

21:29 Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees;

21:30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.

21:31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

21:32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

21:33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

21:34 "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly,

21:35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

21:36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Such a charming Advent story this is.

Nature signals the apocalypse. Waves roar and crash. People faint from fear. The powers of the heavens are shaken. God is coming—is it to deliver us or destroy us?

The message of this story is that the Reign of God is drawing near. You, the Beloved People of God will experience something you have never experienced before. You will be free. Truly free. Free from heartache and hardship and free from oppression. A new heaven and a new earth are coming and they will bring a communion of love and peace.

That day is *coming*. But don't fall asleep. Don't miss the signs.

I expect that most of you don't put much stock in apocalyptic stories like this one. Why should you? We're all sitting here on a pleasant Sunday in the season of Advent and life is pretty good. There's food in the fridge. We're finishing our Christmas lists, maybe baking favorite holiday recipes, putting up the tree. Life is pretty good.

So when we do come to church, out of old habit, it's to see friends, to hear good music. Very few of us came this morning to hear about the world ending. What are we supposed to do with this story? Why even read it? I think there's something in apocalypse that we all need to hear.

First, you need to know what apocalyptic literature is about. The word apocalypse means "unveiling." In Scripture, it's a genre of story in which God pulls aside the veil to reveal a hidden, dramatic deliverance that God is about to bring. In apocalyptic stories, there is a cosmic

battle, a struggle, a period of suffering followed by victory. Apocalyptic offers hope when hope seems lost.

Luke wrote his story of Jesus and the Book of Acts just after the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans. He wasn't including apocalypse in his gospel just to be dramatic. People were already stirred up. But Luke was saying, "pay attention amidst the destruction! The Reign of God will rise from this place!"

Luke's apocalypse continues from this story in chapter 21 to the trial and death of Jesus on the cross, but of course that is not the end. The Reign of God does emerge out of the destruction and death, and it is already unveiled for those whose eyes are open. God's Reign doesn't look like the reign of the Romans—there are no marching armies in the Reign of God, no king on a throne. The Reign of God looks like friends eating around a table, it looks like loving one's enemies, it looks like the wind of the Spirit blowing you toward relationships with people you have no business talking to. The Reign of God that this apocalypse unveils looks exactly like the song Mary sang at the start of Luke's story, before she could see where it was going, she sang: "The Lord has done great things for me, pulling the mighty down from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things." Mary saw beneath what was visible.

In every apocalypse, there is a moment when you are asked to see. A moment when destruction and despair appear to have the upper hand, when the long night of suffering never seems to end; but those for whom the truth is unveiled see dawn beginning to break.

There is a moment at which everything turns. There is a turning point. What is that turning point? How do we talk about the moment when God gives us the ability to see God's redemptive, liberating work beneath what is visible?

TS Eliot in his poem, *The Four Quartets*, spoke about "the still point of the turning world." He was offering a description of that moment when the chaos and futility of life are pushed away; a moment when we are free from compulsion and from suffering. That moment is a "still point." That still point is where eternity meets us in time; it is where grace enfolds our being; it is the very presence of love around us, within us.

When God's truth finds you it is a stillness.

Be still and know that I am God. Be still.

I don't know how much time you make for stillness, especially at this time of year. I confess to you that it's never been good at slowing down. Why be still when there's so much to do?

My resistance to stillness is slowly being worn down. Maybe I'm being worn down. But I'm more open than ever to the intentional practice of stillness. Part of my openness is the influence of Howard Thurman. You've heard Beth or I about Thurman before—Thurman was a mentor to our friend and mentor, Rev. Dr. Paul Smith. Thurman was one of the great civil rights

leaders of the 20th century, one of the great freedom fighters, although he is never ever talked about as such. But it was Thurman who met with Gandhi in the 30s to talk about nonviolence, it was Thurman who learned from the Quaker mystic Rufus Jones, it was Thurman who started one of the first multiracial congregations in the United States, it was Thurman's book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, that Dr. King carried with him for spiritual sustenance in the movement.

Thurman was, to borrow a term, a mystic. How does a Black man in the early 20th century Jim Crow America—in the middle of our racial apocalypse—how does he figure out how to drop down into stillness? How does he find in that stillness that his being is fundamentally connected to what is Real; that he is a participant in Truth itself; that Love is in him? Thurman's unassailable connection to deep truth—the deep truth of Black belovedness, the deep truth of nonviolence, the deep truth of reconciliation—provided strength for the Civil Rights movement. Thurman's practice of meditation was a practice of seeing beneath the visible apocalypse, a paying attention to God's unveiling.

I want to read you today a passage from Thurman's *Meditations of the Heart*. Here's he's talking about his own search for stillness, which he calls "centering down." What you'll hear is Thurman describing what happens—that we sit still and try to be quiet, and when we do, our minds start working asking all kinds of important questions. It's not those questions that we're there for. It's what happens beneath the questions. I'm going to read this slowly. By every report, Thurman read things slowly—sometimes taking pauses so long that people thought he had fallen asleep.

"How good it is to center down!
To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!
The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;
Our spirits resound with clashing, with noisy silences,
While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.
With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;
A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.
We look at ourselves in this waiting moment — the kinds of people we are.
The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives? — what are the motives that order our days?
What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go?
Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?
For what end do we make sacrifices? Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?
What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?
Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.
As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind
—
A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.
It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered,
Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round
With the peace of the Eternal in our step.
How good it is to center down!"

When you hear apocalyptic stories—stories about roaring waves and darkened suns and worlds ending and new ones beginning—don't be so quick to assume the authors are talking only about external realities.

The mystics—mystics like Mary and Howard Thurman—have told us, again and again, that the world outside of us is kind of projection of the world that is inside of us. There is no way for you to be oriented to what God is really doing around you if you are not oriented to what God is doing within you.

So amidst all of the roaring of the waves, and amidst all of the deep injustice, and amidst all of the chaos and the confusion of the world around us, there is a persistent message from Scripture—from God—that comes to us again and again and again:

“Lie down in green pastures, stay beside the still waters.”

Listen for the still, small voice.

“Peace, be still!”

“Be still and know that I am God.”

Last week, Erin opened us to the experience a different quality of time. She expressly invited us into a reflection on what it means to talk about “God’s time.”

This week, I want to invite you into a consideration of motion. More specifically, I want you to pay attention to what it is to NOT be in motion.

Motion is an act, a process, a change. It is movement.

In a sense, everything is motion. In the beginning, God set the world in motion, and it has been spinning ever since.

- The earth moves through space at ?
- The earth spins at ?
- The atmosphere is always in motion
- Within our bodies, motion is always taking place: the blood is pumping to and from your cells, air is moving in and out of your lungs
- At the atomic level, motion is a given. Within any molecule, there are protons and electrons literally spinning around one another.

Given all of this motion, what could “stillness” possibly mean?

It’s kind of an imposition.

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Howard Thurman and Stillness

Primary focus on religious experience

The nature of religious experience cannot be ignored

Spiritual, not just political, dimensions of liberation

Prayer, centering, stillness, pause

Thurman talked so slowly—people wondered if he had fallen asleep

Apophatic... truth is not in the words but in the silences...

The mystic experiences “a vital experience of truth itself.”

The individual mystical experience affirms a person’s ineradicable participation in truth; we are not just perceiving it, we are part of it

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