

Faith Mennonite Church
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Stand up! The Posture of Advent
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

If you've been to see a movie lately, you've probably seen the trailer for the doomsday movie "2012." Or maybe you've seen the full length, 2½ hours of special effects of crumbling buildings, falling meteorites, and civilization being pummeled into the sea. If you're not a movie-goer and haven't heard about this film, let me just say that it's premised upon a notion, based on the ancient Mayan calendar, that the world will end on December 21, 2012.

I doubt that I'll let my sons talk me into going to see this movie although they are special-effects junkies, but the trailer alone helps me appreciate Luke's version of the end times or last things—what theologians like to call eschatology. Luke's memory of Jesus' teaching has a hint of cataclysm: of "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth, distress among nations, confus[ion], and the roaring of the sea" (21:25). But Luke doesn't dabble in conspiracy theories or strike fear and terror. He recalls Jesus saying, "When you see these things happening, stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near."

Stand up and raise your heads. This is the posture of Advent. But still you may ask: Why do we have to bring a text like this out on the first Sunday of Advent? Can't we just have the nice Christmas story of Jesus being born in a manger, with shepherds and wise ones, and angels singing? Do we have to talk about disaster? Do we have to talk about the end of the world?

The late African American poet James Weldon Johnson wrote an essay in 1927 about the tradition of black preachers in America. The essay was a preface to a series of eight sermon poems he wrote, including the familiar "Creation." In it he recalled a variety of well-known black preachers spanning back to the revolutionary and pre-Civil War era in the US when whites and blacks together flocked to hear their powerful, rhythmic messages. Johnson recounts one preacher who, after reading a rather cryptic scripture—perhaps one of the more eschatological ones—closed his Bible with bang, took off his spectacles and by way of preface said, Brothers and Sister: This morning I want to explain the unexplainable, find out the undefinable, ponder over the imponderables and unscrew the inscrutable!"

I'm afraid I'm not quite so confident in my power to do that! But, the truth of the matter is that all of the scriptures in the Old Testament that the church has interpreted as prophetic words, anticipating the coming of the Messiah, were written in the midst of disaster. The prophet Jeremiah received the words we read this morning—words of promise anticipating justice, righteousness, salvation, and safety—while he was in prison. Jeremiah's ministry took place in the context of geopolitical upheaval as regional power shifted from Assyria to Babylon. Israel had already been a divided kingdom for several hundred years and had a string of weak and unjust kings. The northern kingdom, Israel, had fallen to the Assyrians 100 years before Jeremiah began his ministry. Jeremiah is known as the prophet of lament and his ministry was marked by the anguish of trying to speak God's word to a people who would not listen and who eventually were driven into exile in Babylon.

Now if anyone would have been justified in wishing for a 2012 end to it all, Jeremiah would be a prime candidate. But instead, the vision he remained open to receiving and the words he spoke were those of hope. It was a vision of reconciliation – the future included both portions

of the divided kingdom, Israel and Judah. It was a vision of restoration: justice, righteousness, and safety are all reestablished. And it all revolved around a relationship with God: this newly reconciled and restored people and place were to be called “The Lord is our righteousness.”

And Jesus, whom we believe to be the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecies, was also born in a time of geopolitical turmoil. Israel was no longer in exile. God’s people lived in their homeland. But that land was occupied, ruled by the Roman imperial power that did not recognize the dominion of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, or David. The killing of the innocents not long after Jesus was born surely felt as cataclysmic as any earthquake, any flood, or any portent in the heavens.

Jesus was a survivor of that slaughter; his family knew firsthand the experience of living as refugees, from their sojourn in Egypt. He was not traumatized by that experience, but rather trusted that God’s way would prevail. He could say with confidence, stand up and raise your heads!

Our coming celebration of Christmas can only be authentic if we are ready, yes, to begin by bowing in homage to the babe in the manger, the mysterious wonder of the God of the universe entering the human experience as a fragile baby. But then we must stand up and follow Jesus through life into the turmoil of human existence, into the pain of everyday life, into the terror of humanity’s ability to destroy life. And then, if we understand the heart of Christmas we will stand up and raise our heads because we know Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Because Jesus could walk into death and not be overcome by it, we know that we too can stand up and raise our heads even in the very face of death.

This week’s cover story in *Newsweek* magazine is about the 118 days that journalist Maziar Bahari spent in interrogation prison in Iran following the contested elections there in June, which he was covering. The first words that Mr. Bahari’s interrogator said to his blind-folded detainee were: “Never look up, Mr. Bahari. While you are here—and we don’t know how long you’re going to be here—never look up.” Mr. Bahari’s interrogator meant to intimidate, to denigrate, to instill fear and terror in order to exact information. But Mr. Bahari did not have the kind of information that his paranoid captors sought.

Mr. Bahari survived the interrogation sessions, the cruel beatings, the threats by remembering and replaying in his mind the lyrics of songs. He was also sustained by a wonderful dream in which two “sisters of mercy” emerged from the lyrics of a Leonard Cohen song to tend his wounds after an especially painful beating. He immediately recognized one of the sisters of mercy as his sister who had recently died but he didn’t know who the other one was. It was only after his release and the subsequent birth of his first child, as he cradled his newly-born daughter in his arms, that he realized who the other sister of mercy had been.

The interrogators in our world, those who sow fear, say: “Never look up...never look up!” But the God of Advent, the God of history who was before creation and who permeates the cosmos and will bring all things into lasting wholeness, says “Stand up, raise your heads!”

In the December newsletter in your mailboxes this morning, you’ll find a story of how one of our younger persons, Sophia, stood up and raised her head to witness for peace this fall. When the children’s choir she sings with was slated to give a Veterans Day concert at the Veterans Administration Home, her director instructed all the young singers to send her the names of family members who had served in the armed forces so she could make name tags listing this information. Sophia and her mother explained that Sophia’s Mennonite grandfather and uncle had not served in the armed forces but had offered alternative service during World

War II and the Vietnam war because of their religious convictions. The choir director responded positively and made Sophia a nametag bearing this information, and Sophia happily shared the story of her grandfather and uncle with others at the concert. Stand up and raise your heads!

One of my uncles related a similar experience in an email earlier this year when he learned that my husband Gerald was directing the Justice and Peace Studies program at the University of St. Thomas. During World War II Uncle Dan was on a train to South Dakota to begin his alternative service assignment with Civilian Public Service. He was in the glassed-in lounge writing a letter when a high-ranking Army Officer came in.

The officer said: "I see that you are in charge of a number of healthy looking young men. Why are you not in uniform?" Uncle Dan explained to him the Burke-Wadsworth Act that Congress had passed allowing conscientious objectors to do work of national importance under civilian direction rather than going to jail. My uncle's group was on the way to the Black Hills to build a dam for the Bureau of Reclamation. He explained that they would not be paid and that, in fact, they would need to pay for their food, which their church had agreed to pay for them. The officer had many more questions about the biblical basis for concluding that they could not join the military. He confided that he too was a Christian but that his church had never taught about peace.

Uncle Dan concluded his account: "When we got up to leave, the officer had tears in his eyes. He gave me a big bear hug, and said, 'Never lose that, it is the only hope for this violent world.'"

Stand up and raise your heads! This is our Advent posture. Be a witness to hope; our salvation is drawing near.