

Homily for Sunday, Nov. 28, 2021 – First Sunday of Advent



Our Church year, the liturgical year, begins pretty much the way it ends--with readings that are not easy to interpret or apply to our lives. They are quite philosophical and full of end-time imagery that leaves you thinking, "What could this possibly mean for us in this place and in this time?" Or you might say in mid-life, "Where is

this whole thing going?" Or again, for those of you well past mid-life, "Is the whole world going to hell in a handbasket?"

Jesus says in the gospel, ***"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..."*** It seems to me the creation story, from the book of Genesis, is being reversed. Creation is falling apart. The lamps that God hung in the sky—the sun, moon, and stars—are now sending out distress signals. The waters that God caused to recede, so that we could walk upon the earth, are now rising again threatening the only place we have left to stand on. Our ancient parents, Adam and Eve, once *raised up* the dust of the earth, are now fainting from fear and foreboding and *falling back* to the earth. It appears, from the words of Jesus, and from many of our own experiences, that the created world is falling apart.

This week I spent some time with a person whose mother died suddenly with no chance for a last farewell. Her world, in that moment, was falling apart. The sun, moon, and stars, for all intents and purposes, may just as well fall from the sky.

This week, I spent some time with a prisoner in Dorchester whose entire family, including his wife and three daughters, have give up on him and want nothing to do with him ever again. The only one who hasn't given up on him, totally, is his mother, and she's not allowed to visit him even if she wanted. Right now, his world has fallen apart.

This week I was able to offer a bed, meal, shower and a roof to a homeless person. This person carried their life's possessions into the rectory in a few garbage bags. It wasn't always that way, but it is now. This person's world, at this moment, is falling apart.

Getting back to scripture--the Book of Genesis in particular--we read where God's creation went off track early on in the game. So, a do-over, a mulligan, was needed. God caused a flood to wipe out much of creation, but it would not wipe out a small group of faithful people, including Noah. With this apparent reverse of creation, the chaotic waters have come back and are flooding everything once again. However, after 40 days on the ark, and just like in the creation story, land pushed up from the waters. The ark and its inhabitants would find refuge on this piece of land, and life would begin again. The rainbow in the sky is not only the sign of God's promise never to bring destruction upon the earth, but, more importantly, the rainbow is the Son of Man, the Full Human Being. This one appears as things are falling apart, arriving from a place that transcends collapse. Jesus, the Son of Man, coming in a cloud, is the new earth, the new place to stand upon.

In the first reading, Jeremiah is trying to comfort the citizens of Judah after all its leading citizens were deported to Babylon leaving the rest destitute and discouraged. Jeremiah tells this dejected minority that a new branch will rise up from a stump that seemed to be dead. The Promised Land, the kingdom King David once ruled over has been chopped down by the Babylonians leaving only a stump. But from that stump, God will cause a new branch to emerge and Judah will be saved. We know that branch as Jesus. Jeremiah tells those people, what we are told today, "You will be saved not because you are good, but because God is good. ***The Lord is our righteousness.***" In the midst of creation falling apart, when you can't hold things together anymore, God is there holding it together for you.

You were meant to fall apart. So was I. So was all of creation. There is no regeneration in all of nature without something first falling apart, first dying. When you first hear this "falling apart," you'll want to resist it with all your might. Or, you'll bow your head in defeat and admit, "There's no meaning in life; it really is all going to hell in a handbasket." But Jesus tells us to do something else when life is falling apart all around us. He says, "***Raise your heads.***" Why? "***Because your redemption is drawing near.***" To put it another way, Jesus says, "***In the world you will have hardships, but do not fear; I have conquered the world.***"

The late Stephen Levine was an author who spent his entire adult life helping the sick and the dying. He was an expert in grief work helping concentration camp survivors, Vietnam war veterans, and victims of sexual abuse. He tells a story of a woman named Hazel. She was suffering from cancer and came into the hospital in “a very limited state.” She was angry and nasty with everyone. The nurses called her “a real bitch on wheels.” Then one night, when she was in especially fierce pain, she just let it all go. A series of profound realizations followed. She joined with what she later called, “the ten thousand in pain.” She joined with “a brown-skinned woman, breasts slack from malnutrition, a starving child suckling at her empty breasts...an Eskimo woman, lying on her side, dying during childbirth...the body of a woman dying by the side of the road after a car accident.” Later she said she saw that her pain “wasn’t just *my* pain. It was *the* pain.”

There is something about pain, suffering, hopelessness that immediately puts us in solidarity with all people who have suffered one time or another. When we can take our personal pain, our little pain (*my* pain) and put it into the pain of the world (*the* pain), we immediately encounter the One whose pain redeemed the world—Jesus. We encounter the one who says, “***You will have hardships, but do not fear; I have conquered the world.***”

We stand almost 2000 years on this side of the Jesus’s resurrection. We know how the story ends in ways those people could not have known. ***So, raise your heads, because, indeed, your salvation is drawing near.***

Fr. Phil