

Horizon of Hope

A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, November 30th, 2014

Read Mark 13:24-37

Dear Lord, we're not doing so well on our own.

Come and help us.

We thought we'd taken matters into our own hands.

Come and save us.

We presumed that we had a sure and certain future.

Come and rescue us from ourselves.

We've lost our way. We sit in darkness.

Come, shine your light upon us this Advent.

In a memoir by the great Austrian violinist and composer, Fritz Kreisler tells how, at the advanced age of thirty-nine, he was drafted into the Austrian army at the beginning of World War I, serving in the trenches on the eastern front. The scene is riveting: this stunningly brilliant, delicate, yet powerful violinist clutching his rifle, with bayonet attached, firing at Russian soldiers across the battlefield.

Years later, Kreisler could recall only snatches of those events in battle, most of them disordered in his mind. Partly it was because of the chaos, the trauma and the fog of war that had jumbled his memories; but more deeply, he recalls being “completely resigned to my fate, without much thought for the future,” so that “uncertainty of the morrow tended to lessen the interest in details of today.” This great virtuoso, who had memorized complex musical scores with ease, came to realize that major periods of his life were simply, utterly lost because the “uncertainty of [tomorrow] tended to lessen the interest in details of today” (recounted by James Nieman, president of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in *The Epistle*).

Kreisler's account reveals how the loss of a future leads not only to the loss of memory but also to the loss of one's self—that is, if you are headed nowhere, then you may have no idea of who you are. If there is no tomorrow that orients you, figuring out who you are today can be an impossibility. Without a vision of that horizon of hope, you can be utterly lost in the chaos of darkness.

For us in the northern hemisphere, these are days of diminishing light and encroaching darkness. Sunrises and sunsets are brief, although there was a magnificent sunrise this morning at the dawn of this Advent season. Horizons quickly retreat. And for many people, these are also days of lessening our souls by the shortening of our lives. *We live longer, but we live less.* So many people work harder and longer hours than ever before but increasingly with diminishing satisfaction and so little meaning. Trapped by our lot in life, many of us see little reason to care and maybe no way to move forward with our lives—adrift and bruised on battered streets, ensconced and alone in darkened rooms of drab apartments.

As Kreisler concluded, “The uncertainty of tomorrow lessens the interest in details of today.” No tomorrow. No memory. No identity. I suppose this is especially true for the aged and the terminally ill who are especially aware that their days are numbered. The forgotten and the unlovely, the ravaged and the addicted, the jobless and the hopeless—all whose survival is tried and tested in the tribulation of every day—all seem especially uncertain of tomorrow.

When one's horizon of hope has retreated to darkness, people may either lie down in sedated defeat, as many of us do, or they may rise up in explosive anger, committing violence upon themselves and others. As hope grows dim for ordered, sustained, peaceful resistance of the powers that oppress and entrap, rage boils over chaotically onto whatever might be true, whatever might be just.

“The world rulers of darkness... the spiritual forces of evil in the high places,” remain unshaken by human suffering and sorrow which long for some horizon of hope for tomorrow. “For our struggle,” says Ephesians, “is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens.” Thus we often pray in the words of that tender hymn: “Healer of our ev'ry ill, / light of each tomorrow, / give us peace beyond our fear, / and hope beyond our sorrow.”

Yet we fail to cry out to God with the prophet that “...you would tear open the heavens and come down.”—a frightening prospect for people who are well-satisfied by our lot in life and not something we desire in our sedated state of comfort and complacency. We remain deluded into believing that we can yet manage by ourselves, that we can meet all our needs with our own resources, that we can solve all our problems with the swipe of those plastic cards, or by moving a little faster everyday (and faster... and faster), or by gaining unlimited access to overpowering torrents of information. We can do it ourselves. Like the addict, we don't need intervention, not from our families and loved ones, not even from God, until we realize, in the depth of darkness, when we have “hit bottom,” that “our lives have become unmanageable... and that we must turn them over to a power greater than ourselves.”

As the French philosopher and mathematician, Rene Descartes, arrogantly concluded, and we seem to confess with longing hearts: “science will triumph over death.” Such is the depth of our delusion. But the blue dawn of Advent speaks about people whose need is so great, whose darkness is so pitch black, whose emptiness is so vast, that they cannot possibly contend with any of it by themselves. The horizon of their hope and the source of their help must come from beyond themselves, because, much to our privileged dismay, “God does not help those who help themselves”—find that pithy aphorism in the Scriptures and let me know where you found it. The message that is everywhere to be found in the Scriptures is that God helps those who cannot possibly help themselves.

Isaiah, Paul and Jesus speak today for the afflicted, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mourners, the pressed down—all of us who have been badly battered by the present age and now have our hearts astir by the hope that the present is not our fate, even though many of us seem quite content for this present age to be our eternal fate.

In your place of false contentment and plastic optimism, you probably will not observe Advent *again this year*, but instead rush recklessly, heedlessly, headlong into “happy holidays.” The world tells suffering people that there is nothing more than our present plight; and don't dare to hope for anything else, so go straight ahead and spend everything you've got and haven't got *today* because there's no tomorrow for you.

People of faith believe that God intervenes to open up a future. Egypt. Bethlehem. Calvary. The Upper Room. Easter's empty tomb. The day of Pentecost. People of faith will have a passionate, ardent desire to give Advent a chance—for once in our lives. If I haven't persuaded you by this time to take another look at Advent's horizon of hope, I'm probably not ever going to convince you. Your circumstances in life will someday need to lead you to an Advent, because God loves to make a way just when everyone else has decided that there is no way.

With this horizon of hope in our hearts, we can dare to resist the deadly powers—today; and we may see those dark powers shaken in the heavens, and the stars falling from the skies as the blue dawn breaks upon the horizon.

“Healer of our ev’ry ill, / light of each tomorrow, / give us peace beyond our fear, / and hope beyond our sorrow.”