

## Trust Your Roots, Breathe, and Remember the End of the Story

Jeremiah 33:14-16  
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13  
Luke 21:25-36  
Psalm 25:1-9

Happy New Year everyone! Advent 1 marks the beginning of the church's liturgical year. We are now in year C, which means we have transitioned from principally hearing Mark's voice and will now be hearing the gospel mostly from Luke's perspective. Today's reading from Luke starts near the end of Jesus' life and will move us throughout Advent back towards Jesus' beginnings. In this text, we hear of a coming apocalypse and are given all kinds of warnings. Luke's gospel tells the people what to look for so they will know what to do when Jesus' returns. But before we look too closely at Jesus' instructions in Luke, let's talk about olive trees.

How many of you have been to the Holy Land? When I was there, my group had a native Israeli guide whose history with the land brought incredible richness to our ability to learn the Biblical stories. When we went to the Mount of Olives and walked into the Garden of Gethsemane I was struck by the beauty and size of the olive trees. He told me that the average lifespan of an olive tree is 500 years, but scientists have dated olive trees in Israel to 4000 years old. He said the trees we were seeing in the garden were roughly 900 years old. But here's the thing that's staggering to me. My guide cited **this** passage from Jeremiah chapter 33 that refers to the Messiah, a "Righteous Branch springing up for David". He taught us that olive trees have extremely deep root systems. He said that olive trees were repeatedly cut down from invading armies trying to destroy their enemy's resources. But the depth of the roots made it possible for what looked like dead stumps to produce new trees. He pointed to a stump that had a little green spike sticking out of it and then he pointed to a gigantic, ancient, olive tree and he said that is what it would become. In fact, he told us that even though the growth of the trees we can see in the garden are

less than a thousand years old, it is likely that the roots of these trees formed the same trees under which Jesus walked and prayed.

Jeremiah wrote his prophecy about the coming Messiah, from a prison cell. He had been imprisoned for his honest prophetic message about the people's failures to uphold God's laws and, consequently, the imminent destruction coming from the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. The people of Jerusalem heard these words in terror as they attempted to survive the coming cataclysm. Jeremiah was ultimately offering the people a message of hope, God's faithfulness, and the dependability of God's righteousness. But all they could see; all they could feel was the terror. They were staring at a beautiful olive tree, knowing it was about to be chopped down.

The thing about life is that everyone who lives will eventually die. Not everyone will experience a national cataclysm like the Israelites. Not all of us will experience a global cataclysm like Jesus prophesied. But the truth is that death, pain, and loss always feel cataclysmic. Which is why Jesus' instructions are so valuable for us. We know life is hard. We know there are ups and downs. Like the Psalmist, we know there will be times when we sin and times when we are sinned against. We know this life is a journey and we need to keep looking to God for guidance.

When Jesus gives his warning about the coming events, he says people will faint from fear. This word faint literally means to stop breathing. It's like being sucker punched and having the wind knocked out of you. But he doesn't tell his disciples this because **that** response is what he expects from Christians. When Jesus' followers see the beginnings of terrible things, Jesus tells them to "stand up and raise your heads". He says our **redemption** is drawing near.

Now here's the thing. People have been arguing for centuries about when these events would take place and what exactly they would look like when they did. We know Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed shortly after this was written. For the people who lived and worshiped there, this description would have certainly fit. But Jesus didn't come in a cloud, and there was no ultimate or final redemption after that. The earth is certainly experiencing turmoil today and for the folks who endured this past year's tornadoes and hurricanes, it surely must have felt like this. And yet, no final end of days has occurred. Since Jesus never put a date on any of this and since we know this life will be filled with trouble and since we know that each of our lives will end in the graveyard, we have to assume that Jesus' instruction to stand up and raise up your heads is meant for all of us, no matter the size of the cataclysm we face. This posture, this standing up straight, and lifting up our heads, is one of confidence and assurance. To stand up straight in the face of cataclysm is either a mark of insanity, or it means we know something other don't. As people who know the secret of the olive tree, as Christians, as resurrection people, our confidence exists beyond what we see. We trust the promises of God. We have seen and felt the goodness of God and so we know God's righteousness is near, even the times it feels far away.

Later Jesus instructs his disciples to be on guard, be alert. He warns that life's struggles have the capacity to weigh down our hearts, making us susceptible to short term fixes to distract us from the pain. The problem is that heavy hearts, looking for distractions, stop looking for God. If we keep our eyes open for God's presence, we will find it. But if we close off our hearts and numb ourselves, we lose our ability to remain alert. Prayer is the way we stay focused. Jesus tells us to always be in prayer, constantly redirecting our focus to the truths that lie beyond what we can see, beyond what we may be feeling. When the olive stump appears dead, we have to remind ourselves that God is working in places we can't see and train ourselves to trust God's goodness.

The Thessalonians were a church who understood this well. If you read this letter closely, it's almost humorous how enthusiastic Paul is about them. Speaking of cataclysmic events, Paul himself had been kicked out of the city by an angry mob. This was a capital city, filled with Jewish practitioners and other religious sects who did not appreciate the Christian message or what it meant for their community and commerce. The fact that their church had remained intact and continued to withstand opposition was nearly miraculous and Paul was thrilled. When he prayed for God to strengthen their hearts in holiness, this word holiness means dedication. Paul knew the only way a church can survive constant threat and hardship is through focus and determination. To overcome any sort of adversity, a person must be resolved.

This life is often difficult. There are times when we feel that the wind has been knocked out of us. But the closer we feel to imminent disaster, the more confident we can be in knowing the nearness of Jesus, the ultimate victor..... So where do you find yourself in the story? Perhaps you're walking through a cataclysm of your own. Maybe it's the political situation, the well-being of the earth, your health or the security of those you love? As we begin Advent this year, we remind ourselves that we are at the end of the story, working our way back to the beginning. When the end truly comes, all things will be made new. For now, we stand next to each other in faith, looking at either the appearance of dead stumps or flourishing trees.

May we enter our Advent journey with the confidence of those who know how the story ends, determined to praise God regardless of what our eyes see. And if we are weighed down, weak and unable rise, may we be surrounded by those who help us remember the promise of the olive tree, the hope of resurrection, and the life of a baby, born to die so he could defeat death for all of us forever. Amen.

