

Breaking Through the Numbness (Luke 21:25-36)

As a kid, I used to dread August and September. Now that i think about it, most kids have strong feelings about August and September—it's hot, it's the end of summer, and you have to go back to school.

But for me, there was another little bonus—I had Hay Fever. My nose didn't stop running nor my eyes watering until a couple weeks after Labor Day. And if I let it get too bad, I'd have asthma attacks.

Now, the obvious question would be, "Well, so why did you let it get bad?"

Because of the medicine. The antihistamines I took often felt worse than the itching eyes and snotty nose—which is saying something, because those things—as a constant state of being—were torturous.

Staying inside in the air-conditioning helped. But the problem was ... we didn't have air-conditioning.

So, if I wanted any relief, I had to take my medicine—which, as I say, was pretty awful. Taking it made me feel as though I were swimming in corn syrup—a feeling I still despise to this day. Kind of like trying to play Rachmaninov on the piano while wearing snowmobile mittens. But if I wanted to avoid asthma attacks, I had to take it.

So, for about 6 weeks every year—until I was 27 or 28—I either couldn't breathe or couldn't stay awake. So, most of the time, I chose the ever present loopiness of an antihistamine hangover. Just, sort of stumbling about like a zombie, clueless about the world going on around me. (If you ask my wife, all the antihistamines I took have had a residual affect; she's convinced I still have regular bouts of cluelessness, from which I emerge

only occasionally, punctuated by intermittent periods of lucidity while watching baseball.)

In the words of that great twentieth-century sage, Rodney Dangerfield, "It ain't easy being me."

Do you know that feeling? That sleepwalking through life feeling?

That's how the Buddha described the way most people experience the world. In fact, the word "Buddha" means "awakened." The achievement of enlightenment is like waking up while everyone else around you is still in a pre-conscious stupor.

Part of why I think the Buddha would say so many people experience life as stuporous is because our world can be so overwhelming. And rather than attending to life as it is, we find newer and more immersive ways to distract ourselves. Unable to break through the haze, we look for diversions that will allow us to remain asleep.

I went to the monastery at Gethsemani years ago. The Guest Master, Father Damien, did an orientation talk, in which he said that the monks could offer us a gift that we'd be hard pressed to find in the "real" world: silence.

He said that most people are afraid of the silence—which is why we reflexively turn on the radio when we get into the car, or turn on the TV when we get home. We secretly fear the silence, he said, because it's in the silence that the voice of God is most easily heard.

"And, as difficult as it may be for us to wrap our minds around," he said, "most people are afraid of the voice of God. So, we turn up the volume to remain oblivious, numb."

Living in our world at this particular moment—what with the *sturm und drang* of our politics, the chaos of a world where parents fear their children won't return home from school

because some knucklehead with a gun thinks shooting kids is a great way to make a point, the ugliness of the reality in which people of color can no longer take for granted that the system that's supposed to dispense justice is hopelessly rigged against them, the dawning awareness that we're capable of locking up immigrant children in cages, the realization that there exists among us a resurgent White supremacy, a creeping fascism—living in this world, trying to pay attention is exhausting on an epic scale.

If you're even a little aware, it's almost impossible not to become inured to the fear and violence, to become numb to a world awash in pain, dipped to the elbows in the blood of innocents.

William Lamar writes: "I wonder about the numbness in our own day. It's as if some diabolical cosmic dentist injects us with Novocain on the regular. Can we even feel the pain anymore? There is so much violence around us that we seem to ignore it as a coping mechanism. There is so much hateful speech that we

have come to expect it. There are so many vile geopolitical shenanigans sponsored by the American empire and those nations trying to replace it that we wonder about the future of humanity and the good earth."

The sleepwalking of the Buddha or the numbness, as Lamar calls it, is difficult to avoid. It creeps up on us, standing between us and the reality God desires for us.

But if God is most easily heard in the stillness and the silence, how is it that God can break through the storm and stress of our world, the numbness that feels like the safest place to be—nestling into the somnambulant stupor of the perpetually distracted?

I think that's what Luke's getting at in our Gospel this morning. The Gospel of Luke was written sometime after the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E.

Turns out, the Jews, who had been a particularly difficult group of people to control, had finally proved too much for the Romans to bear. And so after a Jewish anti-tax revolt, in 66 C.E., the Roman Governor, Gessius Florus, plundered the Temple—as a way of teaching these unruly Jews a lesson. The Jews responded by inciting an even greater rebellion.

To make a long story short, after a great deal of fighting, the Romans decided not to fool with the situation any longer, and they just bulldozed the city ... and the Temple along with it.

"What," you may be thinking, "does the First Jewish-Roman War have to do with our Gospel reading?"

Excellent question! Y'all are amazingly perceptive.

Well, the thing is, during this tremendous upheaval between the Jews and the Romans, the Christians were closely associated with

their Jewish cousins in the Roman mind. So, the Christians in Jerusalem, of which there were still a large number at the time of Luke's writing, found themselves constantly trying to stay out of the middle of a huge fight between their Jewish cousins and the Roman goons.

Consequently, Luke's readers were in an especially difficult socio-political position. There was a great deal of violence in the air—a violence that didn't distinguish between Christians and Jews.

Living in a war zone for any length of time can cause you to shut down. The whole thing is so overwhelming, as a defense mechanism, you become numb to the pain—sleepwalking your way through life.

How does God break through that kind of numbness?

I mean, you can see the problem, right? If God is most easily heard in the silence—what happens when there **is** no silence? How does God make Godself heard in the chaos, when people are more likely to shut down than to listen up?

By turning things upside down.

When Jesus was wandering the Palestinian outback, forty-some-odd years prior to Luke's writing, God was busy breaking through the numbness, turning the world upside down in Jesus' confrontation of the unjust systems that fed on the misery of the vulnerable. Every time Jesus called out the injustice of the Roman sponsored Temple system, every time he restored an outcast to community, every time he offered healing to the debilitated, every time he extended hospitality to the weak and despised God showed up, piercing the stupor of a people who felt like they no longer had the resources to deal with the world they inhabited.

By the time Luke writes, things have gotten even worse. Being heard in a world where the easiest thing to do is shut down requires something extra, something audacious enough to break through.

Just prior to our text for this morning, Jesus describes what such a world looks like:

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Merry Christmas!

How does God break through that?

Jesus says:

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 of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

What Jesus is dipping his toe into here is Apocalyptic. Apocalypse. You know, the end of the world. Signs in the sun, moon, and stars. Distress among the nations. People fainting from fear and

foreboding of what is coming upon the world. The powers of the heavens shaking.

This is the kind of stuff you expect to have an R rating attached to it. Everything about what makes our current world operate with such brutal efficiency in the service of the powerful is going to be dismantled. There will be great dislocation. The things you take for granted as stable will be destabilized. The current order will be subverted, and a new reality will begin to take shape.

Apocalyptic is dismissed with a patronizing wave by the well-situated as fine for rubes and dullards. Sophisticated people, however, don't pay much attention to the end-of-the-world talk.

But, I would like to suggest to you that the tendency to shrug off apocalypticism is a sign that we've grown too used to the way things are—which is to say, too used to a world that seems designed with people like us in mind. A world where one group

enjoys a life of relative ease, while others do not is not the world God has in mind.

Apocalyptic is God's way of breaking through the numbness and reminding the world that if it's going to satisfy God's desires, the world is going to have to be reordered, turned on its head.

This is always a difficult word for those used to a world that serves them. People at the top of the food chain, people satisfied just fine with the way things are, don't want to hear that things are about to be shaken up.

But there are other people for whom such news is a long awaited word of redemption, a bit of hope in a dark place. Those on the bottom, the small and the forgotten, those who have little to gain from the preservation of the present arrangements, get all kinds of hopeful upon hearing Jesus talk about a new world designed with them first in mind.

Columbia, South Carolina. Mary Chestnut's Diary of March 1865.

"Sherman marched off in solid column, leaving not so much as a blade of grass behind. A howling wilderness, land laid waste, dust and ashes." The end of the Old South.

Mrs. Chestnut neglected to mention, however, in her tale of devastation and woe: there was a group of people who had spent their lives in Hell, treated like property who were dancing in the streets.

For all those benumbed by the current chaos in our world, God is piercing the antihistamine hangover that feels like the safest place to ride things out.

It may not sound like good news to the people profiting from the present arrangements. But there are a lot of people who are only too happy to see the powers of heaven shaken and the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and great glory.

So, stand up and raise your heads, shake off your slumber,
because your redemption is drawing near.

There's a new world coming—which is really the good news of
Advent.

—Amen.