

The earthquake of God

Is 40.1-11; Ps 85.1-2, 8-13; 2 Pt 3.8-15a; Mk 1.1-8

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I have never lived through an earthquake. I am told that it is one of the most fearsome things to live through. The very foundations of the earth appear to shake, as wave after wave, rolls the formerly stable earth like the waters of the ocean. You can't get your footing to stand; you can't stand to run; in fact, there is no place to run since everything around you appears to be falling. And even when it's over, you can't be sure that it's over right away, since there are always aftershocks, some of which are as devastating as the earthquake itself.

An earthquake leaves in its path destruction and devastation. Those who have lived through it know that. Those of us who have not lived through it have at least seen pictures of the horrible earthquakes that recently hit Taiwan and Turkey and Italy, as well as the one that hit the San Francisco area a few years ago. There is no denying the destruction that an earthquake brings.

One of the things that people can do who live in areas that are prone to earthquakes is to be prepared for earthquakes. Like friends of ours in Berkeley, California, they can have their houses built or retrofitted with supports that will enable them to withstand earthquakes. Or, like my niece who is a coordinator for emergency relief in the Seattle area, they can prepare fire departments, police, ambulances, medical staff to cope with the destruction and emergencies that result. (My niece has been coping with another kind of earthquake over the last week!)

But, earthquakes themselves cannot be avoided. They will still happen, no matter how many preparations we take. Nor is their result simply what we might call evil. Those of us who travel to the Rocky Mountains don't first of all see before us destruction, or the aftermath of destruction. Yet, the Rocky Mountains, like so many formations similar to it, are the result in part of massive upheavals as the earth's tectonic plates come together or pull apart, smashing like cars in a pileup into each other and forcing up billions of tons of rock through the crust of the earth. We travel to the Rocky Mountains now and rather than saying: how horrible, we say, how beautiful.

Advent is a time when we think about the cosmic earthquake that we call "the day of the Lord", a time when God's people perceive God's hand at work. Like an earthquake, "the day of the Lord" brings disaster and destruction to people who have so violated the justice of God. Like an earthquake, it is not something that people look forward to: "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light; as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the

wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?" (Amos 5.18-20)

But, the day of the Lord has a certain majestic beauty in it, because the day of the Lord also has a majestic end: the vindication of God's truth and the restoration of true peace, as we heard in our OT reading: "

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people is grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. 9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" 10 Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

The day of the Lord, then, is not simply a comforting word spoken in the midst of ease but a comforting word of restoration spoken in the midst of destruction and judgment. Accordingly, the day of the Lord is not simply judgment and destruction, but rather judgment that is accompanied by the knowledge and comfort of the restoration that will follow.

For the Jews there were various days of the Lord in the form of battles against their enemies. Two of the most outstanding days of the Lord defined who they were as a people: the day of the Lord that we call the Exodus from Egypt and the day of the Lord that we call the destruction of Jerusalem, followed by the Exile and the return to the Land 70 years later. We remember these days of the Lord for Israel during Advent. We remember the people's eager anticipation of a return to the Land in the form of words like those of Isaiah, uttered during the devastation of Jerusalem and the horrors of being a refugee and exile, as the prophet and the people look around them eagerly for signs that God is leading them back to the land.

But, as Christians, we also believe that these early days of the Lord point to and are best understood in the light of the day of the Lord which occurs in the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, heralded by John the Baptist, who preached the fulfillment that Isaiah prophesied: My straight in the desert a highway for our God. For John, it was clear that he was a herald for a time of judgment and restoration, a real cosmic earthquake: "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

At Advent we remember the day of the Lord that comes with Jesus' appearance. We remember that there are those like Simeon eagerly awaiting the redemption of Israel, who welcome Jesus with open arms; we remember that there are those who see in Jesus a threat to their false security and their false peace, and who will thus seek Jesus' death at all costs. We remember that it is at this day of the Lord, when Jesus dies, that an earthquake shakes the earth and that all of time and the heavenly bodies seem to stop as the Word of God dies on the cross. We remember that it is with an earthquake-like movement that God opens the tomb and brings Jesus forth, to the shame of those who crucified him and for the glory of all who turn to him in faith and repentance.

But, we not only look backwards, to Israel and to the events of Jesus' day, but we also believe and confess that there are future days of the Lord, even after Jesus, each of which must now be understood in light of the world-changing event that has happened in Jesus. We believe that there is a coming day of the Lord. Now, some believe that, after Jesus' death, there is only one other day of the Lord that we can expect, a day some call the Second Coming, a day on which the earth will be destroyed and all humanity will be separated into the righteous and the unrighteous. Some believe that this doesn't happen until the end of all history, and think that this is what we are saying when we repeat: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Some, like the American author Hal Lindsay, even make millions from books detailing how Jesus will come on a specific date and what are the signs surrounding that coming.

But, in fact, that is to consign not only us to waiting-room Christianity, but also Jesus to some sort of heavenly waiting room. This view leaves Jesus standing there observing all of our wars and trials, sufferings and joys, in a kind of bemused distance. It is to leave those like Hal Lindsay, driving around in their BMWs, enjoying the fruits of the fear that they sow in the hearts of faithful but undiscerning people.

Is it not rather the case that the day of the Lord we celebrate in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a day on which Jesus is enthroned as true king and reigns, from that time forth and forevermore, a day on which past and future come together? If so, is the reigning king, Jesus our Lord, not actively involved in all the events that happen? Is it not Jesus who presides over the Fall of Jerusalem, which is in fact prophesied and described at the end of the Gospel of Mark, as well over the Fall of Rome? Is it not Jesus who presides over D-Day and the fall of the Fascist powers, over the collapse of the Soviet Union, and over the fall of Apartheid in South Africa? Or, are these just coincidences of history and of no real concern to Jesus, and thus to the Christian Church? Are the events that happen in their wake simply the results of geopolitical realignment or the aftershocks of the intervention of God on his day, aftershocks we call the Battle of the Bulge, Kosovo, and the Congo. But have no doubt, they are only aftershocks and God's restoration of truth is sure.

At Advent, then, and as we heard last week, we are to be like good investors, eagerly looking around for how we can best make use of the riches with which we have been entrusted. As such, we look around us through Jesus, and the focus that he brings to all of history, as well as to the future, helps us to see this:

First, we cannot know when the day of the Lord will come to us, since it comes like a thief in the night. When people say it is close, it is far, and -- as 2 Peter notes -- when people say it is far in the future, it is close at hand. We think that everything is fine, then suddenly sickness hits, we lose our job, our spouse leaves us for someone else, the stock market collapses, war begins. We can be prepared to some extent, as my niece tries to do for people in the Seattle area for earthquakes but then the World Trade Organization protests hit.

Second, the day of the Lord will come because the justice of God is necessary to burn away all the chaff and to show by fire what is truly incombustible and refined. Judgment and suffering is sometimes inevitable. But, woe to the person who presumes to take the lead in bringing that judgment; that is God's role and God's alone. God's justice is sure, and we may therefore be sure that that which is offensive in God's sight will be obliterated from the earth in the day of the Lord, but our job is to intercede before God for all his creation.

In the great day of the Lord that for the United States was the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln showed true greatness not in seeing himself as one who was bringing God's judgment but as one who, like Moses, interceded for the whole people, those whom he considered not guilty, as well as those he considered not guilty. In his Second Inaugural Address, delivered in early in 1865, the last year of the war, when it was clear that the south would lose and the north would win, Lincoln spoke to the people concerning the hopes, even then, of both the north and of the south: *"Both read (PRESENT) the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. ... The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope-- fervently do we pray -- that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wrath piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether".*

And, third and finally, you may also be sure in Christ, that God's last word to humanity is not destruction but the restoration by God through his King, our Lord Jesus Christ, of that which is pleasing to God: mercy, peace, and truth. Even as judgment is sure, so is comfort in the midst of judgment the sure end of the Lord's day.

And so Lincoln concluded his second inaugural address with the justly famous words of reconciliation, even when destruction could have been his last word: *"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan -- to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."*

We know not what the future holds for us. We know not whether in the next century Canada will remain a country or whether in a day of the Lord the injustices of the past will be judged by God who will rend the country; we know not what the future holds for our city, or for the Anglican Church of Canada. What we do know is that we are eagerly to look around seeking ways of bringing God's investment in his world to full growth, knowing that judgment will come when the Master returns and returns again, but knowing also the reward for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, mercy, peace and truth, prepared for the destruction of what is offensive to God and looking eagerly for the restoration of what is pleasing to God.

And so, we look to our King, and we pray, Come, Lord Jesus, come soon.