

INHERIT THE EARTH
STAY IN THE CITY

Texts on Sunday, May 5, 2013

Luke 24: 36-53; Revelation 21: ^{10, 22}—22:⁶

A film from 2010 by Danish director Lars von Trier received little notice then, but I hear of it more and more now. It is called *Melancholia*. A heavenly body—far bigger than an asteroid—has appeared in the night sky. It seems more beautiful than the moon—but is it moving? How? Will it fly by Earth? Will it . . . ? Can people deny the evidence of its approach? The film's sole subject is a wealthy family living on an elegant country estate, reacting to this approaching orb, one in this way, another in that.

It would be too small to say the film is about global warming. Rather, the film evokes silence for a question of absolute urgency: How do we meet the news that there is no more normal now—that everything will change, that we must change; not just our person, but our civilization must change; and with it every connection, every living system? How to meet that news?

When the subject is climate change, some of us wonder, Why worry about a far-off threat that doesn't affect us where we live? Has the preacher already forgotten about mass incarceration and stop+frisk? About immigration abuses and the need for education and health care delivery right here in this community? Others of us feel overwhelmed. Climate change is just too big—like that planet coming in the skies of *Melancholia*. It is news we can't use in the pews! What can we do? These responses are normal.

Now, in many stories, the Bible shows us a different kind of response to shocking news. When God's messengers confront mortals in person, they are always terrified. You heard this this morning—men "startled and terrified" at the appearance of the risen Lord. Yet shock and awe are not God's point. God wants to communicate something, but our fear in the Presence of God's truth keeps us from receiving the truth. So stuck are we to our conception of our safety and normality that God can't get through. To help us, God's messenger says, "Fear not!" for God wants only that hearts and minds open to the new. The risen Jesus is still more direct than are angels in other stories. *Why are you frightened?* he asks. Then he shows them the awful signs which empire and domination have visited with malice in his flesh; shows them also that in the eye of God, man's evil has come to nothing, for he lives! *You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good* (Gen 50:20). Jesus' news is that there is no more normal now—for "normal" took root in the soils of our fears. Fear not! Now everything must change. Now you can meet the news.

Brothers and sisters, do not be startled and terrified at the news of global warming. Even as the storms of climate change gather irrevocably in the seas, in the strength and courage of the life God gives you, (which is not life in the body, but that life you have whose sole end is in God) see what is.

The Bible presents an unflinching civics lesson: Since the dawn of civilization, empire and domination have marked the face of humanity. Fear not! In these pages, Egypt then Assyria then Babylon and Greece and Rome smear two thousand years of victories and sorrows upon the tiny people of Palestine. Fear not! Empire is all about centralizing power in ever fewer hands. Domination is about wresting power from people by inflicting pains and threats on those who would resist the concentration of wealth and power. Fear not. But see this, too: Not just the few, but many benefit from empire and domination. *I* benefit from empire and domination. For me, of white skin, my walk through this city is unmolested. My teachers always cared for my mind, and even helped me to see our society critically. Empire and domination make the gas in my car cheap, the asphalt roads smooth, the price of a banana pennies—and no conditions have ever forced me to hunger for a whole day. Empire and domination secures these benefits for enough people to secure itself, and obscures the structures which can operate to loosen the bonds of evil on which the system depends.

Mass incarceration, stop+frisk, abuse of immigrants, ruinous education, racist non-delivery of health care, willful wars waged against tiny despots at unmeasurable expense in blood and treasure, banks gambling away the wealth of the nation, corruption of democracy by legalized bribery, and the planet heating up to death so Exxon et cetera can make more money—come, Christian people, these are all one operation. See this and fear not! Put on the whole armor of God; face the ancient facts. Empire and domination have always ruled through injustice. Never will the threat just end in harmony, but vigilance is wanting; for empire knows it must give people little packets of pleasures they come to think they cannot live without.

Yet in the midst of empire and domination, Jesus walked and died and rose and appeared to many, the good news. What news? Is it that you personally will be given a hall pass in heaven forever, more or less just as you are? That is no good news. My goodness, if we have the courage to remember the last person we cursed with anger or disdain, what grounds have we to think that an eternity with our self would be anything but hell? No, the good news is that everything must change. Even the church—especially the church—must change.

In the not-distant future, the centralizing of our economy, which is our human relations, must end. Food and energy must come not through cen-

tralized systems of wealth making, but in the way the very source of energy is distributed to us from the sun, widely and freely for a whole earth. It is true that local food and renewable sources of power will no longer help anyone amass massive wealth, but no one needs massive wealth to be human, to be at peace. What must come instead are resiliency, connection, support, relationship, flexibility, community, sabbath.

Now, someone no doubt thinks the preacher is reverting to a utopian dream cooked up in his youth during the summer of love. Not at all; my thought turns toward something quite different. Industrial economies were not built with humans or creatures in mind, but with money in mind. If it is not slowed way down, the trajectory of earth exploitation on which we are now embarked will break the world economy. It cannot survive. Read the news.

Therefore, how the current empire and domination come to their end is of utmost moral significance. An end can come through devastation and wars for water and dwindling croplands and from cracking the foundations of the earth to squeeze the last of fossil fuels like blood from a stone. Or the future can come through people making ready to govern themselves, to regulate themselves—people mature and no longer addicted to stuff; people who want to disconnect from disconnection and replace the space left over with responsibility and relationship. This is a work of spiritual development.

To get a feel for how communities in one city (Burlington, Vt.) are already engaged in strengthening the relationships by which a sane future must come, visit the website www.frontporchforum.com. While you're there, notice that the new world does not require that everyone move out to the country. Indeed, you can stay in the city and realize this new level of connection—even in a high-rise apartment building. Even in a high rise church steeple. The forces of climate change require that humanity now undergo a test to forge a new human civilization in this century. The test is a question of spiritual development, first and foremost.

Christian community has an urgent role in this history. On the one hand, no church can magically separate itself from the spiritual disease of the wider society. If we could, we would be a cult; we would not be God's love for a whole world, but against it. Jesus saw this. *Stay here in the city*, he told his disciples. Here in the church we already have the laboratory set up to help with civilization's great test. We are not yet using it very creatively; we still lean to hierarchy and domination. Nevertheless, the local church is a laboratory for experimenting in decentralized love, distributed as widely and freely as the rays of the sun. Here is the Cross, the symbol of voluntary relinquishment of fears and attachments for the sake of a whole world. Cross your heart and hope to die from your addictions and your small-mindedness, for

you yourselves—not this temple; God needs no temple—are called to be a parable of the holy city coming down out of heaven from God. Taste yourselves. Test yourselves. Cross yourselves. Remember Jesus' beatitude: *Blessed are the meek; they shall inherit the earth.* Do not fly away in denial. Do not suppose that only Montana and Vermont have a future. No, stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high. For this is the community in which you can work out the connections of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity and self-control which the whole world is waiting for. Amen.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*