

THE INWARD ARC
A WORLD IN TUMULT

Texts on Sunday, December 2, 2012

Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Luke 21: 25-36

Jesus says *There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars*. Really? A lot of people awfully excited by the “end of the Mayan calendar” sure think so. Why, last week, NASA sent out a de-bunking message *in re: end-of-world* to try to head off self-destructive excess, especially among youth. *Will there be distress on the earth among the nations?* Ask Greece. Ask Egypt. Ask Syria and Palestine. *Will the people be confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves?* That question stings. Go ask Sandy’s victims. Or Irene’s or Ivan’s or Katrina’s. Or climate change deniers. Last Friday, network news offered a kind of Global Warming 101 on the subject of ocean heat and hurricanes—a story which, just a few weeks back, no broadcaster would have dared to risk in terms so clear. *Are people filled with foreboding at what is coming upon the world?* They are! They don’t agree about just what *is* coming upon the world, but foreboding is selling at market highs.

Does this mean the Son of Man is coming in a cloud with power and glory . . . Now? Soon? Ever? If you mean *coming on a certain day, so News Channel 7 can get a reporter on the scene*—I don’t think so. I never have. Now, my belief doesn’t make me right nor those wrong who hold to a literal belief in Jesus’ return. But there are so many things that you’re liable to read in the Bible that --ain’t necessarily so . . . let’s be clear. In this fellowship, many do not take the Bible as a guide to astronomy, physics, geology, paleontology, meteorology, cosmology, biology, sociology. . . and that list could go on. The Bible is not for science. Very little did they understand about natural causes and effects. The biblical visions of things future are speculative and imaginative. Therefore, we let go of worry about predictions of the end of the world. It’s not what the Word is for. Even Jesus says so.

The Word is for what is good for you. For you, just you, each one; and for you all together, and even more together than any “you” has ever been. This is the Bible’s concern from beginning to end. It’s a love letter sent to the ages, an album of stories, poems, songs, and missives that have helped people hold on to their integrity when all the world was in tumult. What’s on these pages became our Bible because people returned to these writings again and again in times of tumult. Here they found help. The stories aren’t here because they happened; they’re here because they helped.

Since the time when these 66 books were finally clapped between leathers, tumult has been our tale. Empires have risen and fallen with awesome

violence. Evil works have walked the earth wreaking mayhem, famine, war, poverty, and disease in every age. Tumult is our name. Up close and personal, we visit impatience, slander, and cruelty upon one another in families, at work, in our churches and schools and streets. If you yourself are more or less free of that, you are blessed and therefore able to be a blessing—and face more courageously the tide of tumult! Will it ever recede from our shores? I do not know. But I know that the Bible was wrought from times like ours, because all times were like ours. Who needs a bitter, blasted angry god to promise to do the world in when we're working so hard at the same end ourselves? Why, the distinctive feature of the tumult of our times is that, infinitely more than all our ancestors put together, we have unpacked powers from the vaults of the earth which can unleash upon all creatures worse hell than any old poet, painter, or prophet ever dreamed of.

If you take it in, this awful unbalanced relationship of the human creature to the creation—do not resist it—then the ancient scriptures of the end times can begin to make sense. Deep in these visions of the last judgment, two streams of brilliant truth are flowing. One is this: All things are there brought together under one eye, the I AM. Everything is connected to the will of God; therefore, everything is connected to everything. When we say God is Love, total connection is our whole meaning. When we sing *All you need is love*—or, *Love one another even as I have loved you*, or *Ain't gonna study war no more*, affirmation of the union and communion of all things is the sole theme. If on World AIDS Day, our hearts break in compassion for all who died so young, and we remember that Africa's fate is ours, where some four million children are orphaned by AIDS, and we remember with our heart that we are all of one family, and aim to aid Africa, then the biblical vision of the end time is showing a crack of light in our darkness. If we owe it to our children's children to hand over a habitable planet neither sizzling nor bombed beyond use, the theme is one and the same with the visions of the end times: All things are one, made by the Creator and not by ourselves. The ancient myth of end times coming after great tumult has always been rooted in this vision of connection and right relationship of all before God.

The other stream of truth flowing deep in the myths follows directly from the first. We are responsible for what we have done to unravel the fabric of God's creation. In the old vision, each soul had to face a reckoning judgment in God's court. If that video doesn't work on your screen any more, try this vision, shot with the tumult of our times: Since all things are connected, how do we know that our last mindlessly unkind attack on a co-worker is not part of a chain reaction which will manifest as violence or disease or poverty in a far land in people yet unborn? Be on guard! Be responsible! Since all

things are connected, how do we know that the last tank of gas we burned in our car will not prove to be the tipping point for a Greenland ice sheet? Be alert at all times. Be responsible!

The mythic vision of the end times has no other purpose than to bring home with indelible vividness that all things are connected and we are responsible for the tumult. However, the holy word aims neither to cause pain nor to dazzle magical predictions in front of you. This word is for practice. It's for something to do. "Stand up and raise your heads . . . Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and the worries of this life; so that day does not catch you like a trap, for it will come upon all who live on the earth." This word is for your own good—for you just you, and for you all together. It starts with acknowledging a moral responsibility and a moral imperative to become spiritually mature. What might that mean?

No more protesting *I'm only human*. Only human? Have you no idea what capacities for love and unity your Creator has installed in your original equipment? No more protesting *He made me feel guilty, bad, awkward*. Nonsense. No one *makes* you feel anything. Certainly it is true that when others exhibit little self-control, their behaviors seem like arms swinging in our neighborhood. But they don't make you have your feelings. Your feelings are yours. You are responsible for them, and for growing up in Christ. Listen. You are eternal. Your thoughts and feelings die. You and them are not the same. Learn practices to open your inward eye to distinguish vitally between what is living and what is passing away. Stand up. Raise your heads. Be on guard so that you are not weighed down by worries. Learn to be alert at all times, for as never before, the world needs those who practice the presence of God, connecting all things.

Look, I'm glad the President will be the President come January and I hope the lawmakers apply the brakes justly before that fiscal cliff rolls up under our wheels. But I don't think we're about to return to normal when that is done. I don't believe in one-shot solutions. I don't believe in movements which proclaim that their solution will bring peace and prosperity all. I believe we're in one of the roughest roller coaster rides history has engineered. And I believe that people who are on the inward arc, preparing to become more holy and mature in spirit; people who know they have already died; that their lives are hid with Christ in God; people who are not fearing any man—these are the ones whom God will send to serve as shepherds for the sheep in the times of tumult. There is only one gift to seek of God: to put on the mind of Christ. This is the same gift the world most needs of you. It is strength for the high and the low, wisdom for plenty and for want. Tumult

is our tale. Holy help is all that counts. Friends, have you got a ticket for the holy roller coaster ride?

Beginning this Wednesday afternoon at 5:15 pm, I will be teaching a practice in meditation which comes from Christianity's long tradition of practicing the presence of God to grow in Christ. If you want a ticket for that, it's free. Like everything else that belongs to God, you have only to ask.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*