

Stand Up Straight...

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

Fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world?!

What is this kind of scripture text doing when we are hanging up garlands and ordering poinsettias, as well as making our lists and checking them twice? Choirs in many congregations and denominations are preparing cantatas to remind people that this should be a time for talking about the joy of the Christ Child, and we should be singing songs that are uplifting and full of happiness. Skip the depressing thoughts of the Second Coming and the Last Judgement and let's get on to "Joy to the World," for gosh sakes. We can deal with that end of the world stuff after Christmas.

The stresses, the loneliness, heartbreaks from disease and relationship disintegrations. It can be enough for people just to keep their heads above water. People are looking for a break. Make the world go away, for a little while.

But the world will not go away. And the images that Jesus uses are timeless, with metaphors and realities that surround us, and we have to deal with them, in one of two ways.

The first way: some believers prefer to circle the wagons.

That's an image, coming from the Saturday morning cowboy movies, that some of us are old enough to remember seeing. That is, when the Indians would attack the wagon train of settlers, as the Indians always seem to have done, you go the family wagons, if there were enough of them, and arrange them in a circle. Then the besieged pioneers would poke their guns out from behind their wagons and pick off the whooping savages as they rode their horses around the circle.

And it usually worked for the pioneers as they traveled in Indian country, according to the plot lines in the movies. When danger would come, circle the wagons...**or go into the fort.** There was always some kind of fort, with wooden stockades and parapets that allowed for a vigorous response to the Indian threat from the calvary with their bugles blaring and flags unfurled. If the settlers knew that the Indians were coming with evil intentions, it would be time to go to the safety of being inside the walls with the gate locked behind them.

The trouble is, the reality of history shows that forts were not all that successful, unlike the movies. And circling the wagons sufficed until the defenders ran out of ammunition, or food, or whatever. A very pragmatic image, to say the least, but circling the wagons only worked so long back then.

Some would say that we still live in “Indian Country” after a fashion.

You name the challenge, which some people will call threats. Immigration, sexual orientations, skin colors, climate change, bullying, natural disasters, and even wars themselves. All these call for responses to make it through, which as Jesus notes, “For it will come upon all who live on the face of the earth.” To the barricades then! Head to the castle and pull up the drawbridge, hunker-down... Circle the wagons, and keep the adversaries at bay.

But then comes along Jesus with a different mindset to use with the things that bring “fear and foreboding.” Here is the other response...And it’s not to circle the wagons.

Rather...**Stand up and raise the head!**

That’s a different approach. No hunkering down for the Masters’ disciples .

For as ones that have been called to live as the followers of the Master, we are **not only to stand up and raise the head, but to live lives that look like they expect this stuff to happen**, believing that one way or another, we will make it through, even if it not in this life, as we demonstrate that our everlasting home is heaven, where we pray to “live with thee there.”

This is the encouragement of the apostle as his readers, and we, look to the future. It needs to be said from one witness to Jesus Christ to another. Advice handed down, as it were.

Even Presidents give their successors advice about the future. Some of you may have noted the wording in the letter that the late George H.W. Bush left for Bill Clinton on President Clinton’s inauguration day, in the tradition of most Presidents for the one who will follow. Here is what Bush 41 wrote:

January 20, 1993

Dear Bill,

When I walked into this office just now I felt the same sense of wonder and respect that I felt four years ago. I know that you will feel that, too. I wish you great happiness here. I never felt the loneliness some Presidents have described. There will be very tough times, made even more difficult by the criticism you may not think is fair. I’m not a very good one to give advice; but just don’t let the critics discourage you or push you off course. You will be our president when you read this note. I wish you well. I wish your family well. Your success now is our country’s success. I am rooting hard for you.

Good Luck - George

What the apostle “leaves on the desk” for us are challenging words. Indeed the language is not one of weak resignation with the fingers crossed behind the back, and a ready duck at a hint of trouble, but rather a command that almost sounds like being in a military formation. The translation that you have: “stand up,” but a better read (of Ἀνακურσάτε), might be, as **another English version has it: “stand erect.”** For those who have been through military basic training you may get this. And to be sure, sometimes the physical body does not allow, for one reason or another, a person to anatomically to stand up straight...we know that. But you get the picture. (Theological body language, if you will).

And it sounds like my mother, who used to tell me from time to time: “Stand up straight when I am talking to you.” (She didn’t have to say that very often, of course). Well this is not my mother talking here. But it is the command of God’s Word to us.

For we are called and loved by the Master, who gave all for us on the Cross, and then was raised up on Easter morning. **For that reason, no matter the challenges, and there are always so many, we can stand erect,** during the reading off the Gospel each Sunday morning as a tradition, but more importantly in the knowledge of the Providence of our Lord, in the love that will not let us go...whether it be around the this table or out in the world of uncharted territory.

So stand up straight. Jesus is talking to us.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

December 2, 2018

First Sunday in Advent

FN: dec2s