

December 2, Advent 1C (Luke 21:25-36)

What will it take to break through our numbness?

October 23, 2018

Do we ever expect that something extraordinary will happen when we go to church for worship? We know the routine, right? We stand. We sing. We sit. We confess, pray, listen, and give. We eat. We leave, and come back and repeat. Given the predictability of public worship and the routinized nature of liturgy, the likelihood of worship becoming brittle, rote, or even mindless is great.

When we can no longer stand the well-worn regimen, we introduce new stuff. A praise team here; liturgical dancers there. Screens crawl down from our ceilings. Fog effects from dry ice machines and pulsating stage lights jar us to attention. We do what is necessary to keep up with the times, to hold on to eyes, ears, and bodies—often without sufficiently interrogating the reasons for our actions.

Our worship adjustments and innovations point to something beneath the cosmetic surface of technological tinkering and basic ecclesial home improvement. In the words of my Hebrew Bible professor, Jack Levison, we're all trying to "break through the numbness." We want to clear a path so that God's work in the world through the church won't be obstructed. We want divine encounters of the 21st-century kind to be easy and relatable, even fun, for those who come seeking God in our pews. As with Uzzah, who tries to catch the ark of the covenant so it won't fall (2 Samuel 6:1-7), could it be that our desire to help God is the problem?

Breaking through the numbness is God's job. Breaking through the spiritually anesthetized places in our hearts and souls requires resources beyond the best-intentioned pastor, professor, counselor, spiritual director, or friend. The latest toys, trinkets, and gadgets for worship won't cut it either.

In Luke's Gospel, God is breaking through. God offers in Jesus a soteriological vision that is social and spiritual. God is moving among humans in ways that reverse the ordering of the status quo. Jesus is inaugurating God's work of restoring humanity and creation to God's creative intent. Numbness is being pierced with every healing,

every blessing, every time an outcast is caressed by God via Jesus' touch.

But is the numbness really being pierced? Or is this my own wishful, churchy thinking? The rhetoric of the Magnificat (1:46–55) and the Beatitudes and Woes (6:20–26) is often diluted to make God's realm more palatable. 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.

We are numb to the beautiful, too. I feel my body and spirit craving beauty. I have taken to watching the sun rise from my rooftop. I am walking more and paying attention to birds and flowers and trees. I see people strolling through parks and on beaches, drawn into beauty as a means of being lifted from the morass. I observe humans being human to other humans. That may be the most beautiful thing of all.

On this first Sunday of Advent, amid the ugliness and the beauty of our contemporary moment, God shows up. We can't do anything to make this happen. Our technology, our liturgies, our preachments, and our books can't seduce God into appearing. God shows up because God wills it to be so. And in Luke's Gospel God shows up suspended in the amniotic fluid of an unwed teenage mother, and then sleeping in a trough for livestock. A God like this is liable to show up anywhere.

And God does just that through the ministry and message of Jesus. In this week's text, God shows up where we often expect God the least: in the temple, the church. Our Sunday routine will not keep God out of church today. Our Christmassy platitudes won't bar the door. Today Jesus grabs the mic and thunders words, apocalyptic words, sure to work better than all the screens and dry ice machines in the world. If we listen, numbness doesn't stand a chance.

Apocalyptic language is the poetic speech of the oppressed and bruised straining toward hope. It declares God's cosmic victory in the face of the evidence of God's defeat. Luke is writing after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by bloodthirsty Rome. The people of God were straining toward hope. They needed to believe in the hidden victory of God.

Jesus declares that signs will be visible in the sun, moon, and stars. The nations will be distressed and confused by roaring seas and mighty waves. Something—no, someone—is coming, and the heavens will be shaken. Look up. Raise your heads. Your redemption is coming. Be on guard, be alert, pray. This earthshaking, heaven-rattling advent of the Human One will bring the justice and beauty that we and the entire created order crave.

The numbness is being broken. The Novocain is wearing off. Witness the ugliness around us and declare its temporariness. Experience the beauty surrounding us and know that it will fill the earth. Your redemption is coming, and God is doing this all by Godself. Expect something extraordinary in worship today.