

LONGING FOR A NEW WORLD
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First Sunday in Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Luke 21:25-36

Jesus said: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

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As you can see I am wearing an academic gown with doctoral chevrons this morning. This gown represents my Doctorate of Ministry degree granted by Princeton Seminary in 1992. I'm wearing it this morning for three reasons.

The first is simply to show it off. It was given to me by this congregation. So I wear it at least once a year when the occasion seems right in order to express my gratitude to the church for granting me the necessary time and financial assistance to complete that degree.

The second reason is to honor Phil Hill. We mourned his death and celebrated his death here yesterday. Phil was a proud graduate of Princeton University and although the seminary and university are now separate entities, they began as one and the same in the 18th century.

The third and most important reason is to highlight a distinctive aspect of the Presbyterian tradition with regard to ministers, something I failed to explain last Sunday during the ordination of elders and deacons. The 16th century reformer John Calvin and others were wary of priests and bishops, in part because they exercised absolute authority over congregations. But also because Calvin believed every baptized person is a priest, a mediator of God's grace and forgiveness to others. Calvin wanted no elitism, no class distinctions in Reformed or what would be called Presbyterian churches. It was a radical notion, a rediscovery, as he saw it, of the founding vision of the Jesus movement.

Ministers in the Presbyterian church are not priests and are more or less forbidden from appearing to be such by wearing priestly vestments. So, what's going on with the black gown, you might ask. Good question. Glad you asked.

In Calvin's 16th century Geneva and other European cities, university professors wore gowns not just in the classroom and lecture halls but also around town. Until recently that was also the case in many American university towns. The gown identified professors as members of a guild. But it wasn't that remarkable because members of other guilds wore distinguishing garments or hats as well. Today of course everybody from plumbers to university presidents wear blue jeans. Class distinctions are out. Comfort is in.

Calvin considered ministers teachers. My title back then would have been *teaching* elder (presbyter) as distinct from *ruling* elder (presbyter). Ruling elders, along with the teaching elder as moderator, sit on Session and govern (or "rule") the church. As I said last Sunday, officers in Presbyterian churches—teaching elders, ruling elders and deacons—are ordained (set aside) to functions, not status.

In Reformed and Presbyterian churches there was to be no "clerical" class. So technically, I am not a cleric, not a clergy person, except in popular terminology. In this

church, I am a “teaching elder.” Presbyterians, in fact, do not acknowledge the traditional distinction between laity and clergy. All of us are priests in the Body of Christ even though some of us have distinctive functions in the church.

The academic gown made sense back *then* in *that* social context. It was a quick and simple way of showing that Presbyterian ministers were teachers not priests.

These days, however, the only people who wear such gowns regularly are judges behind court benches and preachers in pulpits. Consequently the gown has come to imply something quite different from what it was originally meant to suggest.

Even though I’m not comfortable wearing a pulpit gown for the reasons I just cited, I wear it in deference to our tradition. I could easily be talked out of wearing it at all.

In fact, nearly every time I put it on I hear my mother’s voice saying: *and just who do you think you are?!* She disapproved of ministers who put on airs and for her ecclesiastical vestments and gowns symbolized that. As you know, mothers may die but their voices never do.

Anyway, all of that is pretty interesting, at least to me. But what, you might ask, does it have to do with the gospel lesson before us on the First Sunday of Advent? Not much, actually, except to reinforce the way I (and many other ministers and teaching elders) approach Scripture. My few remaining remarks will illustrate that approach.

In today’s gospel lesson Jesus seems to portend the end of the world, including the planet and the solar system. He also seems to say that the “Son of Man” will show up in the nick of time to rescue true believers. If you didn’t know better you might also assume that the Son of Man is Jesus of Nazareth who left this planet and is waiting somewhere to return in bodily form. Many Christians read or hear it that way.

But, then, many Christians simply don’t know better, can’t recognize this kind of language as metaphorical and so come to strange and frightening conclusions, which find expression today in the extremely popular *Left Behind* series, a huge commercial success capitalizing, in part, on fear and ignorance.

Now I don’t want to imply that education is everything. It isn’t. But it is important especially when interpreting documents that are presented to untutored minds as the indisputable Word of God.

Today’s gospel lesson embodies a type of speech and writing called apocalyptic rhetoric or literature. It was very popular in the time of Jesus when the Roman Empire occupied and terrorized the Jewish homeland. That style of speech and writing had also been popular 300 years earlier when the Greeks threatened to crush the Jewish people and other peoples and nations as well. The New Testament book of Revelation is another example. Apocalyptic rhetoric has been popular throughout time in many societies facing life-threatening forces. Apocalyptic visions show up in our culture in doomsday movies.

Apocalyptic rhetoric is both complex and simple. Simply put, Jesus was expressing a warning using all the standard, popular graphic images of the apocalyptic genre but with a slight twist. Do not despair, he said. Yes, the world as we know it falls apart, time and time again. It just does. But stay alert. For in the midst of darkness and chaos the Son of Man will appear.

And just who or what is that? By citing the “Son of Man” Jesus was drawing on a 300 year old vision or poetic myth from the prophet Daniel who wrote in an apocalyptic style during the Greek occupation of the Jewish homeland. In his so-called “Night Vision” Daniel portrayed several historic empires as beasts—one beast succeeding another with greater and greater ferocity. It was realism in graphic novel (comic book)

images.

In his night vision Daniel also “saw” a figure descending to earth, a figure that wasn’t a beast. It looked human, or in his vocabulary, it looked like a son of man, a child of humanity, a human one.

Through apocalyptic language and images Daniel was conveying hope to the terrified and oppressed people of his time and place. Don’t give up. In the midst of darkness, humanity will arise. You’ll see. A ruler or government bearing a human face will arise. Keep hope alive.

People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

*“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man, the Human One.” **Luke 21:25-36***

Jesus stood within an ancient wisdom tradition the same tradition to which our 500-year old tradition is linked. Jesus taught as a sage. He taught hopeful realism. Things fall apart in our lives and in the world over and over again. But goodness has a way of arising time and time again within the human community. Nothing is permanent but love. So weep with the suffering. But also keep praying and working and longing for love, mercy and justice to arise.