

THINGS FALL APART
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First Sunday in Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

The Second Coming
by William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said, "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. [poetic/mythic language for the "collapse of everything we once counted on"] Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' [code or symbol from Daniel 7 for a ruler with a human face and humane ways] with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."

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This past Thursday, Paula, Betty and I drove to Boardman, Ohio to spend Thanksgiving with my late brother's family—his wife and their children, my niece and nephew—and other assorted members of our family. Boardman is a suburb of Youngstown where I grew up.

That afternoon I took a nostalgic drive through and around the neighborhoods where I grew up. I knew my hometown wouldn't be the same. Youngstown, after all, is a national icon of the Rust Belt syndrome. I had heard of it for a long time but hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

Indeed, my hometown is in ruins—body and soul broken, beaten, bedraggled, and forsaken. In just a few decades economic forces have wrecked havoc on a once thriving, dynamic, and joyous community. Places holding my sweet memories had turned to dust and ash. My childhood home was gone. My elementary school was gone. I felt what millions have felt in other times and other places: shock, disbelief, grief. Youngstown is but one of countless places destroyed by forces beyond its control.

Things fall apart. Sometimes gradually; sometimes suddenly.

In his novel entitled *Things Fall Apart*, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe tells the story of a certain African tribal society that was destroyed in the wake of western religious and commercial intrusions. It's a story that could be told by a thousand other voices.

Things fall apart. Sometimes gradually; sometimes suddenly.

You know how it is: we go along thinking all is well when out of the blue on a sunny September morning, exploding airplanes shatter our towering illusions of invulnerability.

You know how it is: We go along thinking all is well when out of the blue sea barbarians swarm into opulent temples and shatter our illusions of security.

You know how it is: we go along thinking all is well when out of the blue rotten foundations collapse shattering our illusions of easy money.

Things fall apart.

I've been reading Margaret Atwood's new book, *Payback: debt and the shadow side of wealth*. It's a sobering book. It links debt with sin. As you may know, the Apostle Paul linked sin with death in his epistle to the Romans. The wages of sin is *death*. But he could have linked sin with debt. The wages of sin is *debt*. Debt enslaves and slowly bleeds a soul to death. In the Lord's Prayer debt and sin are interchangeable. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Just think: a slate wiped clean. All our monetary debts forgiven. Imagine the feeling.

I have a credit card. It has a seductively high limit. It's a passport to instant gratification, an enticement to greed, a classic and perennial vice.

As a child of Depression era parents I've not been quite as reckless with credit as others apparently have. But I have strayed from my parents' hard earned wisdom: *pay as you go*.

My parents had no credit cards and no major debts but one—a modest mortgage on a modest house, which they slowly furnished over many years on a pay-as-you-go basis. In fact, until my father's railroad wages went up in the 1960s, we had no car, no washer and dryer, and no television.

"Ending up in the poor house" was an expression I heard often from my mother. I thought "the poor house" was a figure of speech until I moved to West Virginia and saw the actual poor house on Poor House Road in Jefferson County. You can be sure it wasn't the only Poor House in this state or in this country. Our parents and grandparents knew that debt could lead to ruin.

At age 10 I was the paperboy in my neighborhood. I delivered the Youngstown Vindicator to about 100 homes every day and collected fees at each home monthly.

The day I got my first pay was the day my mother walked me into a bank to open a savings account. I deposited all of one dollar. Today that would be a thousand dollars?! OK, maybe ten. The point is this: 10% of my earnings would go into a bank. I was also told that one dollar of every ten would be put in the church offering plate. As you can see, I was being taught certain virtues. A portion of everything earned must be saved for the uncertain future; a portion of everything earned must be given away to others.

Those were not peculiar virtues. Those were universal virtues based on ancient, time-tested wisdom.

Several years ago housing values ballooned enabling many of us to draw on new wealth, wealth magically produced as if it were out of thin air. Unbeknownst to most of us we had entered a voodoo world of mirrors, delusions and illusions. It was as though millions of people had hit the lottery all at once. As someone said, things that are too good to be true usually are.

Pay-as-you-go may seem quaint and old fashion but it is based on a realistic view of the world and time. There's no solid proof that things will stay as good as they are now and certainly no solid proof that things will get better and better. We buy things on credit in

part based on faith, on an assumption, that our self-constructed world is stable and dependable. But, as we know or should know, things fall apart. We should not be surprised. But we should be prepared.

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

That's not so much a *prediction* from Jesus as it is a realistic *description* of life in all times and all places. Things fall apart. Lives fall apart. Marriages fall apart. Families fall apart. Communities fall apart. Nations fall apart. Worlds fall apart. They just do.

Jesus didn't have in mind the end of the whole planetary world. He had in mind the end of a certain world based on illusions of security. The end of such a world, if you can believe it, brings with it new hope, a promise of new opportunities, opportunities to be more human than we might have otherwise been. Our own nation faces such an opportune time. But we must, as Jesus said, be alert and awake.

Consider for a moment the early signs arising from this current financial crisis. Are we paying more attention to others now than we did before? Are we weighing our choices in the light of realistic consequence for ourselves and others more than we did before? Are we now willing to show more compassion for the lost, the hungry, the cold, and the homeless perhaps because we can feel those conditions breathing down our necks?

This national financial crisis poses opportunities for our humanity to arise again.

Someone said, the opposite of capitalism isn't communism; it's community. It's looking out for the welfare of all. And someone else said, the opposite of poverty isn't wealth; it's companionship. And it's that promise of companionship that is embodied in this community table and community [Eucharistic] meal where our life is broken, blessed, and given that others might live. In this "thin place" Christ is present feeding us with the gift of love.

The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass once ended a speech on slavery on an uncharacteristically pessimistic note, maybe the kind of note you've heard throughout this sermon. Sojourner Truth happened to be in the audience and she yelled out to Frederick Douglass: *Mr. Douglass, is God dead?!*

Sojourner Truth had little reason to be optimistic but she had plenty of reason to be hopeful. There is a difference.

This is Advent. It's a dark and foreboding time. But the light shall return because God is alive, which is to say Love is alive. And where love is God is present, too.