

HOW DO WE SAY HELLO TO HERE?
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A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on December 1, 2024

Text: Luke 21:25-36

“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. 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. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 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.”

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and I read something the other day that I think gets to the heart of what this season is about. Pádraig Ó Tuama is an Irish writer and theologian, and in one of his books, he asks the question: “How do we say hello to here?” In other words, how do we look at where we are when where we are is dark and depressing? How do we see what’s in front of us when what’s in front of is scary and upsetting? How do we live truthfully when the truth is painful?

Ó Tuama then goes on to describe what a challenge that is. “Much of our desire to not-name a place,” he says, “is because we fear that in naming it we are giving it power.” “It’s a valid fear,” he continues. “To name something can be

to call it into being, and we do not wish to call certain things into any kind of being.” We don’t want to give certain things form and shape and substance by talking about them and describing them and defining them. We’d rather leave certain things out there on the edge of our consciousness where they’re kind of vague and fuzzy because then we can go on with our lives and not have to deal with them.

We don’t want to name, for instance, the here of climate change because then it becomes a real thing, and we have to think about our impact on the environment. We don’t want to name the here of racism because then it becomes a real thing, and we have to reckon with the injustices baked into our society. We

don't want to name the here of poverty because then it becomes a real thing, and we have to look at that person who's standing at the intersection holding a cardboard sign. We don't want to name anything that's going to make our lives more complicated and difficult than they already are. We want to push those things off to the side where they can't bother us.

But whether we want to name the realities around us or not, this morning Jesus confronts us with the fact that where we are is a long way from where God wants us to be, and the road from here to there is going to be bumpy. He paints a vivid picture of a world going through one upheaval after another: ominous signs in the heavens, roaring seas, distress among nations, people fainting in fear. It reminds me of something another writer said. In the words of Flannery O'Connor: "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures."

That's a good way of describing what Jesus is doing in this passage. He knows we'd rather go through life with blinders on, so he's shouting and drawing large and startling figures. He's using highly evocative language to get through to us—to give us a wake-up call; to snap us out of our indifference; to get us to open our eyes and look around and see what's what. Be on guard, he says. Stay alert. Look around at where you are and what's in front of you. Live truthfully in the world. Because when you do, that's the moment when you'll see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud." That's the moment when the kingdom of God will come near. And that's the moment when you'll find your redemption.

But none of this is easy. The world has a way of lulling us into complacency. It has a way of making us turn inward instead of looking outward. And oddly enough, that's never more the case than it is at Christmastime.

I was at Home Depot the other day looking for drill bits, and like every store on the planet right now, they've got all their Christmas merch out on display—all the trees and lights and decorations—plus all the holiday music piped in over the intercom. When I got home, I sat down at my desk to work on my sermon, and I read this passage again, and the contrast couldn't have been more glaring.

Right now, stores are telling us to get ready for Christmas by putting giant inflatable Santa Clauses in front of our homes; while Jesus is telling us to get ready for Christmas by thinking about people who don't have homes. Right now, stores are trying to get us into the Christmas spirit by blaring "Jingle Bells" at us; while Jesus is trying to get us into the Christmas spirit by shouting the truth at us. Right now, stores are selling us an illusion of a world that's warm and cozy and full of nostalgia; while Jesus is offering us the reality that the world is cold and harsh and full of injustice.

It's not a pretty picture, and it's not very comforting, but it's real.

So how do we say hello to here? We start, according to Pádraig Ó Tuama, by admitting that "illusion rarely fills for long." And then we open ourselves to Advent. Because Advent is the antidote to illusion. It insists on telling us the truth. It challenges us to face the world that is because that's when we become aware of God's presence. When we see ominous signs in the heavens; when we hear the seas roar; when there's distress among the nations; when our hearts are

gripped by fear—that's when God breaks into our lives: bringing peace, and building community, and inspiring compassion, and restoring hope.

Still, I always feel like a little bit of a Debbie Downer during Advent—especially on the first Sunday of Advent. We all have the Christmas story on our minds, but instead of cute little baby Jesus, we come here this morning and get wild-eyed raging prophet Jesus, and it's pretty jarring.

But I think that's the point.

During these four weeks, we're all waiting for the birth of Emmanuel, "God-with-us." That's literally what that name means. But before we can welcome this child into the world, we have to understand why he came here in the first place. It wasn't to help us hang our stockings by the chimney with care. It wasn't to sit around with us on Christmas morning opening presents. It was to "ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear."

"When you see these things," Jesus says, have hope because in the darkness something beautiful is growing, and something wonderful is about to be born. Amen.