**When the Stars Begin to Fall**

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A homily for the 1st Sunday of Advent

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

A lot of stars have been falling these past few weeks. And I’m not talking about the Leonid meteor showers. I’m talking about the politicians, news media personalities, entertainment industry leaders, business executives, and many others whose names have papered the headlines with their unethical, disgraceful, and in some cases illegal sexual misconduct towards others. I don’t know about you, but it now feels unusual to me for there to be a day *without* new allegations of some kind against a famous person in the news. It’s just horrific.

The feelings in response to this deluge run the gambit – anger, disgust, betrayal, confusion, uncertainty, solidarity, conviction, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and despair…and that’s just for starters. For those who have been victims of sexual misconduct or assault, I imagine the responses include both frustration and pain at the revelation of how pervasive and unchecked these behaviors are in our society, and also perhaps some stirring up anew of the anger and sadness that can remain for a long time after this kind of violation. For those who find themselves in positions of power within workplaces or organizations, I imagine (or at least I hope) there are new feelings of concern about creating cultures that encourage the reporting of misconduct, meaningful institutional response, and clear, enforceable standards that promote and ensure the respect and dignity of every human being. For those who find themselves having perpetrated these acts, or wondering if maybe they had in the past, I imagine this is a time of great confusion, anxiety, shame, and hopefully some soul searching about what repentance or contrition is required for healing & reconciliation to occur.

Personally, I’ve been pretty upset in these past weeks by what is undeniably a pervasive culture of sexual entitlement among powerful people – powerful men, really -- in our society. I realize that the “sudden onset” of my discontent probably reveals a certain level of ignorance or at least naiveté about how widespread these occurrences are. So much so that some people are only just now even realizing they have been victimized, that they also are part of the #metoo community. And of course, this abuse is just as insidious, if not more so, when it takes place not in million-dollar TV studios or the elite halls of Congress, but rather on the assembly line, in the teachers’ lounge, at the loading dock, or by the fry-a-later....and never makes a single headline.

While not all men abuse their positions of power in this way, it is also true that for many women this culture of misconduct and in some cases criminality has eroded their trust in the possibility for men to hold social, organizational or other positions power responsibly. This is true for friends of mine, and I’ve had a hard time accepting that. I’ve found myself feeling some initial resentment, before those feelings gave way to a genuine spirit of listening and desire for understanding. We have reached the point where there is some justification for blanket wariness of male authority – and yet, the suspicions and counter-suspicions that breeds among good women and good men seem to push us into a viscous cycle of escalating mistrust. We can see this is the rise of the #notallmen as a kind of response to the #metoo movement. Of course, the dueling hashtags and the oppositional sentiments they represent don’t promote the kind of both/and thinking needed to move us into a new place. This movement almost feels impossible – as the roots of this crisis stretch so deeply into the soil of human culture, understandings of gender and power, human biology, and the socialization of children from very young ages. These are foundational elements of self-understanding and human patterning that structure our psychological and sociological universe; elements that seem immoveable.

And yet, that is the precise theme of today’s readings: the contemplation of the moment when the most fixed elements of our reality, the things that seem most stuck in place, are finally moved. The day when the mountains quake and crumble, when the sky is torn open, when the sun will be darkened, when the moon no longer reflect lights, when the stars fall from their orbits.

These images and similar ones from the other lectionary years always pervade the readings for the first Sunday of Advent, the start of a new liturgical year. I used to dismiss them as relics belonging to the unenlightened anxieties of our ancestors in the faith, who used spiritualism to explain natural phenomena that we now understand scientifically. God’s doesn’t make the moon turn red with blood, lunar eclipses do that. God doesn’t cause the stars to shoot through the sky, and actually they aren’t even stars, they’re comet dust. God doesn’t make earthquakes; that’s really plate-tectonics. You get what I mean.

The Gospel passage in particular seems so dated and of its own time and place. It’s known as Mark’s “mini-apocalypse”: that is, his description of the ending of all created reality and the inauguration of the unending reign of God with the second coming of Christ. As you probably remember, Jesus’ early followers really believed that they were living in the final days of reality. They believed that within their lifetimes, within “this generation” as Mark writes, will be some who see the return of Christ and the end of the ages. As the years have gone on, 2000 or so since then, biblical literalists have had to reinterpret these predictions of the world ending to fit both the Bible’s literal truth and the fact that we’re actually all still here. And they’ve done so with very convoluted mathematical modeling that always seems to be revised so that the end times are almost here, but never actually arrive. Other Christians have just let go of these kinds of passages entirely.

I’ve often been that second kind of Christian. But this year, I wonder if that’s been to my own spiritual detriment. These readings strike me differently today. I hear them as something more than just an anticipation of a singular apocalypse or end time; something more than just a spiritualization of planetary science. I understand them now as also creating a space within the Christian life for the possibility that whatever we’ve considered to be the permanent foundations of our reality may fall. I see them as a reminder that God’s power, working in us, is in fact strong enough to erode, dislodge, shake, or destroy even our strongest and most reinforced social foundations. And while part of me finds this upheaval inherently undesirable – watching the stars begin to fall these past few weeks has made me wonder if indeed some of our most persistent foundations are in fact also our most pernicious. Maybe they really do need a good shake out. Maybe we all do. Maybe the stability and predictability that generally works out well for me, isn’t working out so well for us – when we think of us as the whole community of God’s creation.

I used to think that these “end of time” passages were really just revenge fantasies in which victims in the here and now imagined their own vindication when God comes back to make things right. But now, I see them more symbolically than that. I see them not just as describing a singular moment that concludes the end of recorded time. Rather, I see them as describing a way of being in the world that expects foundations to be shaken from time to time. A way that invites us to remain open to the kind of radical change that is sometimes needed for the Kingdom of God to break in.

And isn’t that really what the season of Advent is all about -- creating openness to the radical change that Jesus invites in our own lives and in the life of our world? Whether it is Isaiah pleading for his people to return to the root of faithfulness amidst the chaotic exile of the 6th century BCE; or John the Baptist and his radical calls for repentance and amendment of life; or Mary accepting the Angel’s invitation to bear the holy child and proclaiming in her Song the radical transformation of the world this pregnancy portends; the readings of Advent are all about preparing ourselves to accept radical change. The word radical doesn’t mean progressive (or conservative) it means literally ‘at the root’. Advent is the time to prepare not for marginal change, incremental progress, or baby steps. Advent is the time to prepare for change all the way down to the roots – for giant leaps, for re-imaginings and re-visioningss, for the coming of new foundations that can nourish the roots of a more just, compassionate, and holy society.

So if foundations seem to be crumbling around us; the familiar giving way to the chaotic; the stars beginning to fall – remember what the song says: it’s not the end. It’s the beginning. It’s the morning. And what a morning. What a dawn. What an opportunity. What a challenge. What a hope. What a new beginning. What an invitation. What a need. What a desire. What a gift. When the stars begin to fall. Amen.