“Expecting the Drumbeat”

A sermon for Advent I by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

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Scripture Reference: Luke 21:25-36

As many of you know, David and I lived in New Orleans for a time when we were in our late 20’s. I had just gotten my PhD and was offered a post-doctoral position in New Orleans. So, we left the comfort of our community in Pittsburgh and moved down to the “Big Easy.” Our time in New Orleans turned out to be anything but easy—it was a very difficult time for both of us.

David’s teaching position challenged him beyond what he had the skillset and emotional resources for, and my post-doc placed me in an anxious work environment that exacerbated my own nervous energy like lighter fluid on a fire. In addition to working long and de-stabilizing hours, we also struggled to find a home within white culture in New Orleans. There was much “tradition” we stumbled into, yet no clear way of uncovering its veiled meaning, or figuring out how to belong within in it had we even wanted to.

To boot, the particular racial landscape of New Orleans was forcing us into what was our first significant experiences of gut-wrenching wrestling with racism and our own white privilege. Although not necessarily coming upon *the* world, I was definitely nearly fainting from the fear and foreboding I was experiencing at what was coming upon *my* world.

It seemed almost unbearable to me…but for the street music—the second-line bands. New Orleans street jazz has a tell-tale drumbeat…a syncopated rhythm that originated in the second lines of New Orleans, and which contains so much more than sound. Even when heard from far off, I have a physiologic response to that rhythm…My whole body anticipates the fullness of the sound coming my way, the power it has to dance my feet and my hips, my hands and my head, completely liberated from the self-conscious worries I normally harbor when dancing …

my body anticipates the diverse community that gathers around it, empowering its dancing participants to transcend all their differences and wounds, not forever, but for the entirety of every abundant note of music…I relax, my spirit lifts, I can’t help but grin in what feels like reckless and illogical joy. Even to hear the drumbeat, and not yet see or hear the band, is to have my spirit quite truly grounded within the Kingdom of God.

For me during that very hard time, that second-line drumbeat was Jesus’ own voice proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had come near—it had come near in all my anxiety—it had come near in all my exhaustion and falling short of my boss’ expectations –it had come near in all my dark moments of absorbing, really for the first time, the evil and estrangement of racism.

The challenges I experienced did not happen so that the Kingdom could come near to me, but rather, because they were nearly swallowing me up, the Kingdom came near. On Saturdays and Sundays, whether actually dancing in the middle of those bands or just hearing the far-off of that drumbeat, I felt freedom.

The liberation held in those drumbeats was so affecting for us and for the whole city of New Orleans that merely expecting them to sound again fueled the rebuilding of homes, social communities, churches, and institutions after the heavens were quite literally shaken by hurricane Katrina. We all navigated the morass of rebuilding with our ears constantly straining to hear those first beats of the Kingdom of God…straining to hear that very first post-Katrina secondline band bringing a space of freedom to so many whose feet were planted solidly within the mud of fear and foreboding, grief and loss.

That *our* own expectation of the Kingdom can restore us into *our* own moments of freedom is what Jesus promises us this morning as we start another Advent, another liturgical season of expectant waiting. Jesus promises us that when all hell has broken loose around us, whether personally or collectively, the Kingdom will come near and our redemption—our liberation—will be at hand for some small moment…a moment that is powerful enough to re-member our hope…to re-member our courage….to re-member our passion and energy and ability to love all that God has created around us.

To me, our Gospel passage this morning is not a promise that Christ coming again will cause the heavens to shake and all hell to break loose. It is a promise that whenever the heavens shake and all breaks loose, Jesus’ redeeming love and energy and freedom and grit IS near….it is accessible to us if we expect it…if we strain to hear it…see it…touch it.

*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. 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.”*

As *we* look around here and now there are definitely signs in Creation that something is coming upon the world. On earth there is distress among the nations.

There is confusion, not only caused by the roaring sea and rising waters, by the rain and winds, by the draught and famine, by the tornadoes and fires…but also caused by the most pressing questions about what we are called to do and be as followers of Christ, a people witnessing failures to love those which God has created so catastrophic as to deny them their divine right even to live, never mind thrive.

To live in the expectant waiting of Advent is not only to anticipate our future redemption but to experience moments of it *now*. Moments that will sustain us in all of the hell that has broken loose around us. To live in the expectant waiting of Advent is to see Jesus coming with empowerment and great glory even now. For some of us, in the drumbeats of a distant secondline, for others of us in the beauty of a quiet hilltop…for all of us, in the guilty verdicts of Ahmaud Arbery’s murderers.

*Jesus said, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

Indeed these things are taking place…so, let us stand up and raise our heads! Because our redemption *is* drawing near!

AMEN.