**“It Isn’t Like Waiting for Bosco Bear”**

December 1, 2024 1st Sunday in Advent

Text: Luke 21:25-35

Reed Baer West Parish of Barnstable

Today’s reading is a traditional one for the First Sunday in Advent. The immediate context is Jesus responding to a question about the foretold destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Christians have tended to read this passage with an eye towards divining the future, but listen carefully and you will hear that Jesus is really talking about how we might live here, now, in the present.

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We were in the second grade at the time, my twin brother and I, seven years old and full of energy, enveloped by the joy of life that is school before homework, trustful naiveté, and impatience. It was the best of times because finally, finally, our mother had at long last relented. After weeks of begging and pleading and cajoling and promising that we’d never, ever ask for anything else in all our lives, our mother caved into our untiring pressure and said yes, she would give us three dollars so that we could send it off, plus two labels off the cans of chocolate syrup we used to top our ice cream, to the manufacturer. All so we might get a genuine, “not available in stores,” fuzzy, brown, Bosco Bear.

The next day was the longest day in the history of the world, or at least in our young lives, and when school was at last over and we were dropped off at the end of the driveway, my brother and I raced into the house, each wanting to be first, yelling excitedly to our mother, “Did it come? Is it here?” No, our mother explained to us with a sigh, and according to the instructions on the labels we had sent in, it would take four to six weeks to process the order.

We were crushed – she might as well have told us it was going to take one hundred years! But we were in second grade, with a second grader’s concept of time, and so after a week or so it seemed to us that in just had to have been the requisite “four to six weeks”, and so each day after school we would hurry into the house, eyes scanning the kitchen anxiously for the corrugated cardboard box which would signal the arrival, at long last, of our hoped-for Bosco Bear.

We never stopped thinking and talking about Bosco Bear and what we would do when he arrived. We worked out a schedule for taking turns sleeping with him; we thought up games we would play with him, the one I particularly remember involved playing hide and seek with sticks of rainbow-colored chewing gum; and we even conspired about how we could keep him away from our kid sister.

The funny thing is, looking back on that time, was that in that in-between time, in that time of anticipation and hope, we started to behave differently with each other and around the house. It was not a complete change, but there was a difference – we fought with each other less, we spent more time playing and planning together, and even if we were not much nicer to our sister, we did seem to be better at listening to our parents, making our beds, and not getting into so much trouble.

And we waited. And waited some more. And we slowly came to the realization that this was not going to happen. That the Bosco Company had simply taken our money and labels and was not going to send us that bear. And so those races into the house after school tailed off, we stopped inventing new games to play with him, and we slipped back into whaling on each other. The hope faded.

We are now in the Season of Advent, a season of waiting. Most of us wait. We celebrate the Christmas season, which formerly started on Black Friday, the day after our Thanksgiving holiday, but which now seems to have started a couple weeks ago. A season of shopping and wrapping, garlands and jingles, parties and pictures with Santa. We wait for that day when we give and receive gifts, when we are together with family, when we gather around a crackling fire and share a warm cider or eggnog. In Advent, we wait and hope for that good Christmas, warm and fuzzy and safe. Because we need it, and we deserve it, especially after a long and difficult year.

And don’t get me wrong – I share that hope for a good Christmas. I long for Christmas Day and the excitement of giving and opening presents as much as I longed for the arrival of Bosco Bear long ago.

And yet, even so, what a *small* hope that is, this hope for a snug, Bosco Bear Christmas. A small hope I say, because we live in a world torn by war, poverty, disease, loneliness, and death in its many forms. We are part of families convulsed by anger and disappointment at unmet expectations. Loveable people go without love. Death and illness separate us from a beloved spouse, parent, child or friend. We and those we love are addicted to alcohol or narcotics. Not to mention the wars that continue to tear apart Ukraine, Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Israel. Never mind the sorry state of our union, so deeply polarized.

Early Christians hoped for more than a comfortable, sentimental Christmas at the end of Advent. They hoped for that great, final Advent, the time when all things will be made new, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when all might echo Mary’s song as she anticipates the birth of Jesus, “he has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things,” when all might repeat the angels’ refrain of that first Christmas Day, “on earth peace, goodwill among people.”

This Advent hope is based on the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and on teachings like our reading for today. Peace and reconciliation and healing of the world do not come easily, Jesus tells us. Waiting for these things, waiting for what is important, waiting for what we really yearn for in the depths of our souls, is not like waiting for Bosco Bear. The powers of evil are too entrenched to be overthrown without causing the whole world to shake in convulsions; injustice runs too deep to be remedied without creating waves. It is a messy business, this making all things new, this transformation of the world and our lives.

But it is not something to be feared, Jesus tells us, saying “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

This is our Advent hope, that our God, once again, is drawing near, with the fullness of the kingdom. And so the question that confronts us is not a question of *if*, and it is not even a question of *when*? It is a question of *“Now what?”,* how do we live in this in-between time, in this time of waiting for the fulfillment of the promise, in this time of hoping for that which is promised but not yet here.

Jesus tells us, “stand up and raise your heads.” This is not some sort of survivalist mentality, urging us to withdraw from the world and its problems – no, we are to stand tall, raise our heads, and look around with eyes undimmed by the passion for more money, more toys, more security, more me. Stand up and look for signs of Christ’s presence in our midst. Stand up, look around and see the brokenness of the world, and living with the hope of a better day to come work for justice and peace.

For that day will come, just as surely as on the day when all hope had faded, we walked into the kitchen, my brother and I, to find heaven come to earth in the form of our long-awaited, genuine, not-available-in-stores Bosco Bear!

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