

Many years ago, as I was preparing to preach a Christmas Eve homily, a minister mentor of mine volunteered some advice to me. Through the years he had offered me quite a bit of sage advice, ranging from the observation that far too many ministers, in the easy naiveté of early ministry, have been foolish enough to believe, that they, not the church secretary, are the resting place of the confidences of a congregation. It was he who first taught me that a stem-winding stewardship sermon never raised a penny, but when the congregation believes in the work they are doing as a church, the money will come.

There are decided perks being the recipient of hard-won wisdom, and so would I generally listen to what he had to say, discard about half, and take to heart the remainder. Here is what he had to say about the Christmas Eve Homily.

“In the course of your ministry, if you are a lifer, you will preach some forty-odd sermons on Christmas Eve,” he said. “Under no circumstances should you ever deviate from the tried and true formula for Christmas Eve success.”

My curiosity was piqued, so I said, “Go on...”

“The secret to Christmas Eve success is ‘Whatever you do, don’t mess up Luke 2.’”

I must have looked amused, because he continued. “In the course of your ministry, you will no doubt get bored with Luke 2. There may be occasions when you consider messing with the formula. Resist the urge. There may be occasions when, world events, congregational life, other circumstances, might suggest that you consider preaching from Matthew’s Nativity Story. Don’t do it. People come to Christmas Eve services for one reason, maybe two if you include singing *Silent Night*. They come to hear Luke 2. They

want shepherds abiding in the fields by night, a multitude of heavenly hosts singing Glory to God and peace on Earth. They don't want Matthew's dark version with a murderous king. Save that for another Sunday. Preach Luke 2. You deviate from that at your own peril."

I feel sort of the same way about being landed with a text such as we have this morning from Luke's Gospel on the first Sunday of Advent.

Advent, of course, is the time of preparation and waiting that comes around every year, usually the Sunday after Thanksgiving, and in its wisdom, the lectionary has always chosen to place some sort of apocalyptic text on this particular Sunday.

I've personally have never thought that turkey and apocalypse go well together, but yet here we are.

It's a long way from here to Luke 2. It's a long way from stars falling and fainting and foreboding to shepherds and angels.

It always feels a little bit abrupt to be honest.

No, I really don't apocalypse and turkey go well together, but here we are.

Here's the problem with apocalyptic texts, and it's not that they are scary because they aren't meant to be taken literally, ever. The problem is this: apocalyptic is largely irrelevant unless you are in the process of taking or recovering from a gut-punch.

Apocalyptic isn't for the easy-going; it's for the hard-pressed. For the vast majority of folks huddled in a sanctuary or even congregating as Christians outside the church, focusing on what Jesus is going to do in a far off time in order to make things right is hardly a pressing concern, and so texts like this one today don't particularly comfort us.

And what's more, if things are relatively good, relatively peaceful, relatively secure, most

folks don't go rushing to our other text for the day either. The words of a first century apostle who was still working out his own understanding of Jesus and may or may not have thought Jesus was due back after lunch, as Paul appeared to believe when he wrote the Thessalonians may or may not seem all that relevant to us today because frankly we don't need that much strength, and frankly, taking it from second-hand correspondence to a small church in a Greek city isn't our idea of taking the bull by the horns.

But if you have experienced that gut-punch, then you know what I'm talking about. If you have experienced that moment of desperation and fear, terror and sadness then you know that there is power in these words. You know at an elemental level that there is good news to be had in knowing that God has not stopped working for our good.

When life is rough, the knowledge that the kingdom is near might just be a little bit more comforting, mightn't it?

And maybe for the rest of us, the Word that we need comes to us from Paul's letter, "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

Even still, if turkey and apocalypse don't seem to go well together, baptism and apocalypse seem even more strange bed-fellows. But they are not.

Baptism, you know well, isn't the promise, no matter how much we might want it to be, *baptism isn't the promise of an easy life*. It's the promise that God will always be with us. It's the sign and seal of God's invisible grace in our lives.

This little reminder of the kingdom of God – of its unpredictability and irascibility - reminds us that there is free grace, the kind we encounter at the font, and there is cheap grace, and the two are not the same. When we get this reminder that all is not always exactly as it seems, we are called to recognize the difference and live with it – and if we live with costly grace - that’s the free kind – then that grace demands our very lives precisely because of its vision of the kingdom of God where the broken and sinful constructs of life as we know it just won’t stand up under the scrutiny of God’s judging love. When we baptize babies, we are baptizing them to live into this kingdom. To live into all its possibilities and all its demands.

They ought to cry.

You know I have an almost unblemished record of peaceful babies, but if they had a clue what we were doing to them when we set them aside to serve the Lord, they ought to scream at us until we stopped.

They ought to cry because we have marked them and set them aside – we’ve chosen for them a lifetime of living against the grain – and not in the easy way of living against the grain that has become popular to proselytize. When Jesus calls us to be counter-cultural, he’s not talking about the holier-than-thou variety, he’s preaching about the radically inclusive, graciously hospitable variety that just is not going to make us comfortable.

It’s written all over the Gospel. If you read the bible you can’t miss it. Jesus sets about what I’ve described for years as a systematic campaign to ritually defile himself from the minute he crosses the sea of Galilee into Gentile territory to the minute he reveals himself to the least likely candidate for post-resurrection revelation – the women in the garden. If

you want to be important in Gospel's vision of the kingdom, you better quit trying to be important yourself and start trying to make the unimportant matter.

That's sort of the opposite of what most of life tells us. But being baptized into the work of the kingdom means being baptized into the work of making the Gospel stick, making the good news of God's grace flow out into all the world around us.

Being baptized into Christ Jesus is being baptized into a belief that the kingdom of God can break in and change the right now into what we are hoping for in the future.

I have heard more than one New Testament scholar refer to these passages such as the one we read this morning as *speed bumps*. Apocalyptic texts urge us to slow down and pay attention to the kingdom. Because it's easy for us to get into the swing of the story, to listen to Luke 2, you know, shepherds and angels, and then to get to miracles and healings, and teachings that go down through the ages, and forget that this Gospel we're reading calls for transformation.

Because Jesus, you remember, is always telling us that the kingdom is near.

He's always telling us that the kingdom of God is at work within us.

He's always holding up a mirror to creation and saying, "The kingdom is at hand."

Now that doesn't mean that the world is the way it ought to be. It means that the world can yet be how it ought to be. And when we are aligned with God's view of creation, with God's desires for humankind and all the rest of what God has made and loves, occasionally, God's kingdom interrupts the mundane and disrupts the not-good-enough.

Let me share with you a story from the late Fred Craddock,

"My now deceased friend, Oswald Goulter, thirty years a missionary to China, was under house arrest for three years. He would be released by the communists if he promised to

go home. He wired back, the missionary society sent him money for transportation and he took a ship. He went down to India to catch a ship, and when he was in the coastal city in India before leaving, he heard that there were a lot of Jews sleeping in barn lofts in that city. They'd been denied entrance to every country in the world except that one, and they'd gone inland and were living in barn lofts. It was Christmas time. Oswald Goulter went around to those barns and said to the Jews, 'its Christmas. Merry Christmas.'

They said, 'we're Jews.'

He said, 'I know, but it's Christmas.'

They said, 'We don't observe Christmas, we're not followers of Christ, we're Jews.'

He said, 'I know, but what would you like for Christmas?'

'We don't keep Christmas.'

'I know, but what would you like? If somebody gave you something for Christmas, what would you like?'

They said, 'well, we'd like some good German pastry.'

'Good!' So he went looking, and he finally found some German pastry at some shop there in the city. After cashing his passage Check, he took boxes of German pastries to these Jews and said, 'Merry Christmas.'

Then he wired the missionary service and said, 'I need a ticket home.'

When that story was being told, there was a young seminarian in the front row, and he was absolutely incensed. He said to Dr. Goulter, 'Why did you do that? They don't believe in Jesus!' And Dr. Goulter said, 'But I do. I do.'"

And when Craddock told this story, he said that Goulter was a man straight out of Genesis 1. Cashing his check for passage so that he could share with those not of a same

faith the blessings of Christmas. He just shared hospitality with strangers. He was a new creation.

When we're reminded that the new creation is breaking in, it can all change. Isn't that wonderful?

I hope for every one of us that that apocalypse and turkey never seem like a good combination, but on the off chance they ever do, do you know that you get to be a new creation? I know that may not seem like much now, but maybe someday you'll wish you could press the "reset" button.

Do you know that? You can be a new creation. The kingdom can break in. It's near. The kingdom is so near – it's just waiting to break in.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.