

## **The Kingdom of God is Near**

*December 3, 2006*

(Advent 1- Year C)

Luke 21: 25-31

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

I have a friend named Barney Hawkins, who lives in Virginia. Barney and his wife Linda have two adult children, who are now grown: A son and a daughter.

Their son, Crawford, is an ideal son, a student at the University of Virginia, a nice-looking guy with a good-looking girlfriend. Crawford has become a self-sufficient young man.

Their daughter, Ellen, however, still lives at home with them in their house, which is on the campus of the Virginia Seminary. Ellen works in the on-campus daycare center, where she always shares her smile and her joyous laugh with the children and adults whom she meets.

Ellen loves to dress up and wear a red feather boa, especially when she is going to church.

Ellen is full of love and joy and peace and freedom.

And, Ellen has Down Syndrome.

One time, Barney told me a story about when their daughter, Ellen, was born.

The priest from their parish church came to visit Barney and his wife, Linda at their home, after they had brought Ellen home from the hospital.

The priest held Ellen in his arms.

Then, the priest looked at the baby's parents and, with sadness in his eyes, he said:

"I am sorry that your daughter has Down Syndrome. I am sorry that your baby is not perfect."

At that comment, Linda grabbed Ellen out of the priest's arms and said with indignation:

"What do you mean that Ellen is not perfect?"

To me, Ellen *is* perfect.”

Jesus says to us today, in the Gospel of Luke:

“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.

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.”

Our first reaction to the signs in the sun, the moon and the confused roaring of the waves,

Our first reaction to a child with Down Syndrome,  
Might be to notice the distress and the imperfection.

But, Jesus says that when we see signs of distress and imperfection,  
Then we are to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.

Jesus says:

“When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

This phrase “the kingdom of God” is mentioned 33 times in the Gospel of Luke.

It seems pretty obvious then that the coming of the kingdom of God is an important part of Jesus’ teaching.

And today, on this First Sunday of Advent, Jesus reminds us that when we see trees with new green leaves, then we know that summer is near.

And, Jesus also teaches us today that when we see certain signs, then we know that the kingdom of God is near.

But, what is the kingdom of God?

When Jesus is put on trial, Pontius Pilate asks Jesus: “Are you the King

of the Jews?”<sup>1</sup>

And, Jesus responds to Pilate by saying: “My kingdom is not of this world.”<sup>2</sup>

The kingdom of God is *not* of this world.

The kingdom of God is not a place that you can find on a map, like a political country.

Among religious scholars today, the phrase “the kingdom of God” has been replaced by “the reign of God,” to remove some of connotations of a kingdom that is a physical country in this world.

For, the kingdom of God, the reign of God, is where love and peace and justice reign over hatred and violence and prejudice.

The reign of God is not just some far away vision for the future.

We can see signs and glimpses of the reign of God today.

For, the kingdom of God is near when God speaks to us and loves us through imperfect people.

Right before I went away to seminary, a friend of mine, named Trinka, gave me a gift.

Trinka is a wise old woman and she was so excited to present this box to me, wrapped in attractive wrapping paper.

Joining in her excitement, I tore off the paper and opened the box.

I pulled out a little, white plaster statue of Jesus, with his arms open wide.

But, my face then sank, because I saw that the statue had broken.

One of Jesus’ arms had broken off and was missing.

Trinka saw the disappointment on my face.

But, she said to me:

“Jeff, I bought this little statue of Jesus when I was on a mission trip to Bolivia.

And, I kept this statue by the sink in my kitchen, so that I would see it every day as I was washing dishes.

Then, the other day, my dish towel caught on the little Jesus statue and it

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<sup>1</sup> John 18: 33

<sup>2</sup> John 18: 36

ended up on the floor, where one of Jesus' arms broke off.  
When I saw the Jesus statue, with only one arm, I immediately knew that  
I needed to give it to you.  
Because now, whenever you look at this statue of Jesus with one arm  
missing, I want you to remember that *you* are to become Jesus'  
missing arm.  
You are to become Jesus' arm in this world, visiting the sick, holding the  
hand of the lonely, reaching out to the poor."

Even now, this statue sits on my desk in my office here at St. Alban's.  
My first reaction to the signs in the sun, the moon, the stars and the  
confused roaring of the waves,  
My first reaction to the broken little statue,  
Was to notice the imperfection.

But, now, I see the broken statue as a sign,  
A sign that I am supposed to be Jesus' arm in this sinful and broken  
world.  
I now see the broken statue as a sign that the kingdom of God is near.

So, do not be afraid when you see signs in the sun, the moon, the stars  
and the confused roaring of the sea.  
Do not be afraid when you see signs of imperfection.  
But, "stand up, [put your shoulders back] and raise your heads, because  
your redemption is drawing near."  
For, Advent is about paying attention to signs that tell us that the  
kingdom of God is near.

Advent is about paying attention to Ellen Hawkins, a young woman with  
Down Syndrome.  
And, not just seeing her imperfection,  
But, seeing in her the loving and joyful freedom of the kingdom of God.

Advent is about paying attention to a statue of Jesus with a broken arm.  
And, not throwing the statue away,  
But, seeing in this little statue a call to serve other people in the kingdom  
of God.

And, Advent is about paying attention to a pregnant, teenaged girl from  
the wrong side of the tracks, walking with her boyfriend to  
Bethlehem,  
And not dismissing them as poor white trash,  
But seeing this imperfect and unwed girl as a sign,  
A sign that the kingdom of God is near.

AMEN.

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