

Advent 1/C: 11/29/15
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Good Lord, deliver us. Amen.

What a gospel reading,
filled with gloom and doom and allusions to the end times.
Yet, over the years, whenever it's read
someone almost always says,
"It sounds like today."

And it does.

The last time we heard this passage in church
was three years ago in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy,
the time before was in the depths of the Great Recession,
and this year?

Well, this year we're reeling from the terrorist attack on Paris
earlier this month.
And the downing of the Russian planes.
And the racial strife on the streets and campuses here at home.
And the shootings -- oh, the endless shootings in the public square,
most recently just Friday.

Of course this doesn't take into account the private tragedies
any of us bear.

I don't mean to be a downer on this holiday weekend;
I'm just stating the facts.

And the fact is that this gospel message of tumult
and distress among the nations has been true for a very long time.
In fact, it was true even before there *was* a gospel message.
Before Jesus walked the earth for the first time.

We as Christians might say that this upheaval and distress
is precisely why God sent Jesus to live among us in the first place.

A quick history lesson.
About 500 years before the birth of Jesus
(a good 2,500 years before our time),
God's people in Jerusalem were suffering displacement and terrorism
-- yes, terrorism -- in their homeland.
Their beloved Temple was destroyed and

many of the leaders taken into exile in Babylon.
And those who remained amid the destruction?

The great Protestant Reformer John Calvin describes them like this,
"As they were then exposed to slaughter...
the children of God saw [a] thousand deaths;
so it could not be but that *terror almost drove them to despair.*"

"Terror almost drove them to despair."

These were the people to whom the prophet Jeremiah
was speaking in today's first reading.
In those few short verses of Hebrew scripture,
Jeremiah acknowledges the despair which has tempted the people,
then bids them to live in hope anyway.
He tells them to look for signs of God's promise amid the terror,
and to remember that "The Lord is [their] righteousness" --
so ACT like it.

Not self-righteousness, mind you, but the Lord's righteousness --
as in, acting rightly on behalf *of others*.
For it is serving others that helps lift oneself out of despair.

Many Christians link this prophecy with the coming of Jesus,
and it certainly reads that way on this First Sunday of Advent.

Like the prophet Jeremiah before him,
Jesus does not sugarcoat the world's distress.
On the surface, there is reason enough for despair.
But like Jeremiah,
Jesus bids us not to be "weighed down" by the worries of this life,
not to be terrified by that which would terrorize us.

Jesus himself is the Lord's righteousness.
Jesus was born to show us how to live,
and he longs to be born anew in each of us
that we might live rightly, boldly, without fear.

"Stand up and raise up your head,"
says Jesus,
"for your redemption is drawing near."

Don't hunker down -- *help* --
reach out in love,

offer refuge to the refugee,
learn from those who differ from us.

"Stand up and raise up your head,"
says Jesus,
"for your redemption is drawing near."

Don't cower --
be fearless,
be faithful,
be alert.

Be more like Jesus.
That is what we prepare for this Advent.

May I ask you to please stand as you're able?

No matter what happens in the world around us.
No matter what happens in our lives.
We are ready. We have prepared.
We hear and heed the promise of Jesus,
God's own righteousness,
deep within us.

So:

"Stand up and raise up your heads,
because your redemption is drawing near."

Yes, let us "stand up and raise up" our heads
for our redemption is drawing near.

Amen.