

An Upside-Down Advent: Beginning With the End in Mind

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Caldwell Presbyterian Church

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Text: Luke 21:25-36

Today we say goodbye to an old friend.

Some of us have known her for a very long time, others only more recently. She has taught us so, so many things. She has sought to serve God in all she did. She helped build the kingdom of God in great ways. She also made mistakes and learned from them. She demonstrated the rare courage to remake herself late in life. She leaves lasting legacies in our neighborhood and our city, legacies that she now hands to all of us, a rich inheritance that comes with great responsibility and enormous potential.

I'm talking about the last century, Caldwell's first 100 years. Oh, how we have enjoyed celebrating her over the last 12 months. Oh, what we have learned about the highs and lows and highs again of seeking to follow Jesus. Oh, what we have witnessed in the mystery and the promise of our God. How, how we are permanently shaped by all of it.

We say goodbye to her today because today opens a new year in the life of the church. We are reminded that the church has its own calendar, marked not by holidays like the Fourth of July or Veterans Day or Memorial Day ... but by great festival seasons that remind us of the birth and life, death and resurrection of our Lord.

So today we have much to celebrate ... the closing of the celebration of one century and the dawn of the next. A new church year. A new Advent season. We celebrate by worshipping in a newly painted sanctuary. She hasn't looked this good in decades.

Part of the rhythm of the church is that different versions of Jesus' story are lifted up for us to study each year. Today we begin a long walk with the Gospel of Luke. Each gospel has its unique aspects and insights. Luke speaks to us in particular ways.

All of the gospels borrow from each other and other sources, but half of Luke's account is unique to itself. Luke provides some of Jesus' best-known parables, including the Good Samaritan, the prodigal son and the story of Lazarus. Luke is the only Gospel written to a particular individual, a man named Theopholus (which means Lover of God). It is the only one with an explicitly stated purpose – that we should “know the

truth” about what God did in Jesus Christ. And it is the only gospel that has a sequel, the Book of Acts.

Luke also speaks in particular to Caldwell and who we seek to be in the world. Luke emphasizes Jesus’ ministry to the oppressed, the excluded and others who are disadvantaged in society. Luke features women unlike the other gospels, which has led to some of the most clearly stated and insightful feminist theologies. Luke emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and repeatedly calls us to hope and trust in God’s sovereign design in the present and the future.

As important as any of its characteristics, the combined story told in Luke and Acts define what we know today as Christianity as a distinct movement. Where other gospels leave those who follow Christ as a subset or sect within Judaism, Luke and Acts tell the story of how Jesus and, then, his followers, take the Gospel away from Jerusalem and out into the world.

These two books audaciously propose that Jesus was more than just a great teacher, prophet, mystic or healer. He was the one who ushered in the remaking of the world into the kingdom of God, a place that looks far different from the world as we know it ... a world that has been described as upside down.

It is a reality unlike the one we know or expect, where the last shall be first, the dead shall rise, the shamed, sinful prodigal will be welcomed home with unconditional grace. So it is we invite you all to think of this Advent season, the start of our year with Luke, as an “Upside Down Advent.” We hope it can be a time when we seek to recognize, honor and build the kingdom of God as we find it in the world.

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Appropriately, we begin with the very first words of today’s reading from the twenty-first chapter in Luke, “There will be signs”

“Be on guard,” today’s reading says. “Be alert.”

Ok Luke, we might say, you have our attention. What are we looking for?

We certainly don’t have to look hard for *some* signs of the season. Brown Thursday (formerly known as Thanksgiving). Black Friday. Small business Saturday. Cyber Monday.

Two-for-one. Free shipping. Half off if you buy today. Big red ribbons on shiny new Lexus automobiles. Don't get me wrong. I am pro-jobs and pro-economy within reason. But no one can look at all this and say that we haven't lost perspective, that we haven't lost our balance about what really matters.

These *aren't* the signs Luke points to. So, what are those signs? At first, at least, they may not be the signs we long to see.

"Distress among nations ..." People fainting from fear. The heavens shaking.

Is that we have to look forward to? Are these the signs of the completion of God's work in Christ, when the world will turn upside down from what we now have into a reality where faith and hope reign, where we all truly love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, where nations and individuals alike act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our Lord?

I suppose a lot depends on our perspective, our point of view. What about the view of someone who struggles daily to have enough to eat? Those who are oppressed by systemic injustice in our economy or government? Those who are not sure where they will sleep tonight? The ones whose efforts to better themselves are met only with discouragement, excuse-making and apathy from those who can change the way the world works?

What about those who are lonely and heartbroken? What about those who may have everything they could ever need materially but whose lives are empty and without passion and purpose? What about those whom society rejects because of how God made them?

For them, Christ's birth promises a new world order and any sign of the fulfillment of that promise may be the best news they can hear. For them, perhaps nations should be in distress when they fail to provide adequately for the life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all their citizens. For them, people fainting and heavens shaking may be an answer to prayer.

We live in a time when apocalyptic visions are most often doomsday visions. Every year, it seems, someone predicts the end of the world, at least as we know it. We're hearing that again this month. But, as one commentator has observed, no one in history has successfully predicted the end of times.

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On the cover of today's bulletin is the famous painting by Vincent van Goh titled "The Starry Night." No, it is not a printing error. It's turned upside down to encourage us all to try to see the world anew.

As with today's text, there are two ways to look at van Goh's masterpiece. To explain, let me quote from a commentary by Rev. Kathy Beach-Verhey, who ministered in our community before being called with her husband to another part of North Carolina.

The painting exhibits the bold colors that van Goh is known for Van Goh was the son of a Dutch pastor and for a time an evangelist to the poor himself, so he was likely familiar with texts such as Luke 21. The painting depicts an apocalyptic sky, like that described by Jesus. There are swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep, dark, blue and black. There is a bold and bright yellow moon and very bright stars In the background is a small town with the church steeple as its most prominent feature.

The famous painting elicits differing reactions from those who admire it. Some see it as a daunting image of a frightening sky, others see it as something bold and beautiful, others as a glimpse of God.

What she is saying is that both the Luke text and van Goh's work remind us that it is all in how we see things, what perspective we bring to bear from our own life journey. Either way, both demand that we be on guard, that we be alert, that we look up and watch for what God is doing ... in our lives, in the world, in our community and even in our church.

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The famous business management guru Stephen Covey made his name with his book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. One of those "habits" or management techniques is to start any project, initiative or meeting "with the end in mind." That is, know where you are trying to go, what you are trying to achieve from the start.

Today's first Gospel reading of the Advent season and for the entire new church year seems to be suggesting what Covey has in mind.

Covey is a business management guy - not a theologian. But listen to what Covey says about this habit of beginning with the end in mind and what it might say about us and the Kingdom of God. He says this "habit" is "based on imagination--the ability to envision what you cannot at present see with your eyes. It is based on the principle that

all things are created twice. To Begin with the End in Mind means to begin each day ... with a clear vision of your desired direction and destination.

Friends, our “desired direction and destination,” as Covey puts it, is to see and work toward the full establishment of the Kingdom of God. Luke 21 reminds us that the Kingdom of God opened when a baby came in a manger and grew to be a prophet, priest and king. Luke 21 also reminds us that one day the work will be completed in Christ’s return.

In the meantime, in these weeks of Advent, we are once again invited into a season of watchful waiting and hopeful hearing, a time when we can look up – and around – for new signs of that upside-down world that began in Bethlehem two thousand years ago ... and when we can begin each day with our direction and destination in mind.

Amen.