

Eucatastrophe!

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lowell E. Grisham, Rector
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fayetteville, Arkansas
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Episcopal Revised Common Lectionary*

(Isaiah 2:1-5) –

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come

the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

(Matthew 24:36-44) – Jesus said to the disciples, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

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I have to beg forgiveness today because I didn't ask permission. I'm going to use a football analogy. My wife hates football analogies. She says life is too short; she's given up sports for life. I think some of her attitude was shaped by our first two years out of seminary. I was assigned to a wonderful priest whom I loved working for, but he was a former football star. It wasn't every week, but it seemed like it, that the Gospel somehow connected with football. In that brief time with him, he may used up a lifetime of football analogies for us. But I'm going to try one more, begging your forgiveness.

I heard a football commentator this week talking about a certain attitude that some successful teams have. "You have to be lucky," he said, "to go undefeated. But in some ways, successful teams create their own luck." He talked about a certain attitude that some teams carry. They just believe that they are going to win. When they are behind and it looks impossible, they expect that something is going to happen to open the door for them. So, the commentator said, they are alert for that possibility – an unexpected fumble, a pass that ricochets. They anticipate that something is going to happen, so they are just a bit quicker to react. They get to the ball a split second faster than the team that lives with some dread that the game could get away from them. Again.

Now, let me balance a football analogy with a literary one. Better yet, I'll use some Greek. That'll give me a whole other set of people to beg forgiveness from. Among the words coined by the Oxford University scholar J. R. R. Tolkien in his works of high fantasy, there is the term *eucatastrophe*. Tolkien attached the word *eu* – e u – meaning "good" to the word "catastrophe." A *eucatastrophe* is a sudden turn of events which looks disastrous yet produces a good outcome.

At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, as the evil lord Sauron seems poised for victory, Frodo the Hobbit horribly gives in to the power of the One Ring and claims it for his own. All looks lost, yet his claiming provokes a struggle that ends with the destruction of the ring and the complete downfall of the Dark Lord and his tower. The catastrophe turns good. *Eucatastrophe*. A cause for Eucharist – Thanksgiving.

Tolkien calls the incarnation of Jesus – God becoming human – the *eucatastrophe* of human history, and he calls the resurrection the *eucatastrophe* of the incarnation.¹ We call the day of crucifixion "Good Friday." It is the source of our Great Thanksgiving, our

¹ With thanks to The Rev'd Theophus "Thee" Smith for a 12/2/07 sermon found on the website for St. Philip's Cathedral, Atlanta; also the Wikipedia article on *eucatastrophe*.

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Eucharist.

Advent invites us into a characteristically Christian attitude of hopeful expectation. A certain attitude that believes that something is going to happen to open the door to God's activity as grace – a sudden turn of events where even disaster will produce a good outcome. It is a form of attention, like the successful football team that is waiting for the ball to bounce their way. It is an attitude of poised readiness for action, waiting to respond, alert to react, to claim the impossible possibility of hope. It is the opposite of anxiety. And it is anxiety, isn't it, that so often contributes to the creation of that which we are anxious about.

This week I became worried about a friend who is in a trying situation. I want to help, or maybe even to fix the situation. I have some very specific ideas about that. They are ideas rooted in wanting to protect my friend, maybe even to help him escape from an ominous situation. But he doesn't want my help or my particular solutions. He is intent on staying within the situation to try to find if there is some good that can come out of it. I am given the challenging task to wait – to surrender my anxious solutions and simply to wait with him in support.

I found myself feeling bad about that, carrying around something that sapped

me of energy and joy. Someone has said that depression is merely the impoverishment of imagination. Depression is when we simply can't imagine a world different than the one we are stuck in.² Maybe I had attached myself to some certain solutions for my friend and thus anxiously lost the ability to imagine other more impossible possibilities.

The critic Hugh Kenner once wrote: "Whoever can give his people better stories than the ones they live by is like the priest in whose hands common bread and wine become capable of feeding the very soul, and he may think of forging in some invisible smithy the uncreated conscience of his race."³

I remember a passage from Lloyd Cassel Douglas' book *The Robe*, where some of the characters who are Christians are traveling with a Roman soldier. He notices their odd alertness. Whenever they cross an intersection along the route, they seemed to slow, surveying each crossroad as if they were looking for someone who might be arriving from a different direction. As they neared the crest of each hill, their pace inexplicitly

² William Lynch, S. J., *Images of Hope*; quoted by John R. Donahue, S. J., in an online edition of *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, Nov. 26, 2001; http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=1268

³ from *The Pound Era*, by Hugh Kenner; quoted by Donahue, *Ibid*

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would quicken until they reached the summit where they would slow just a bit, surveying the distance for something expected. When the soldier asked them if they were looking for someone, they demurred mysteriously. It was a friend they sought. You never knew if he might show up, in the next mile, over the next hill, as the next person. Unspoken; it is the resurrected Jesus whom they anticipate.

The scriptures offer words attributed to Isaiah, speaking of a future when “the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains.” When “all the nations shall stream to it.” When “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” When “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” The prophet tells them, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

Yet, in the composition of the book of Isaiah, these words are set ominously in a day when his nation was threatened from the south by Egypt and from the north by Assyria. When politicians gave their anxious advice about how either to negotiate an escape or embrace war as a solution. Isaiah urged them to a higher vision of an impossible possibility.

In Matthew’s gospel today Jesus tells us to keep awake! Catastrophes abound – like the flood of Noah

sweeping people away in their ordinary day. Keep awake for the coming of the thief. But the thief that breaks into the house at the unexpected hour is Jesus. Eucatastrophe!

You never know when he is breaking in. It may be over the next hill or at the next intersection. Even while we wait without imagination, blinded by our attachments, anxious to escape or fix.

We have a better story. We have a story of one who is with us as God’s own presence. We have a story of one who has embraced all that can confront us. We have a story of one who has defeated defeat, who has overcome death. His only weapon is love. His only armor is hope. He tells us we will win. He has already triumphed, so we are victorious.

So keep your chins up. (I won’t say keep your chinstraps buckled.) Keep your spirits up and your hearts alive. Keep your eyes open, alert to the unexpected possibility. At any moment something ominous can turn for the good. A ball will drop, an opportunity ricochet; a door will open; love will be on the other side. In Jesus the game is already determined – you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s. Be strong. Be of good faith.

Eucatastrophe happens!

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