
Stand Up and Raise Your Heads

**A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
The First Sunday of Advent – Year C**

Among the many life skills I acquired while a student at W. I. Thames Elementary School in Hattiesburg, Mississippi was knowing how to duck and cover. Yes, that's right—knowing how to duck and cover. I grew up about an hour north of the Gulf Coast, you see, in a region officially called the Piney Woods but also known as Tornado Alley, The Place Where the Trees Break in Half Like Matchsticks at the First Gust of Wind, and That Area You Really Want to Drive North of if You're Going to be Safe during a Bad Hurricane. Multiple times each year, in response to darkening skies and ominous weather reports, a series of beeps would blare frantically over the loudspeaker, and everyone at our school would rush to the auditorium. There we would fold ourselves into little balls and crouch underneath the sturdy wooden seats just in case a Tornado Watch became a Tornado Warning. Truth be told, most kids had fun during these forays into disaster preparedness. Notes got passed, baseball cards traded, and contraband bubble gum chewed. Every child knew, though, that no matter what other mischief you got into while curled up with your nose pressed against the cold laminate floor, one thing you absolutely could not do was to poke any part of your body out from under your seat before the storm had passed. Even if the jawbreaker your best friend had just given to you started rolling down the aisle towards the feet of the principal, you could not move your hand—and most certainly not your head—from your safe space until the "All Clear" signal had sounded.

Perhaps this is why I find part of this morning's gospel lesson just a little unsettling. Actually, I find a lot of it unsettling, but there are a couple of lines in particular that really give me pause. These are the lines in which Jesus tells his followers that when the sea starts to roar and the waves grow big and everything on the earth gets turned upside down, then this is the time to "stand up and raise your heads." No sheltering in place, apparently, for readers of the 21st chapter of Luke. No waiting for the "All Clear." None of that sensible stuff. Rather, just, "Stand up and raise your heads."

The author of this morning's gospel lesson uses this imagery about winds and rising seas metaphorically to describe situations of political and social upheaval being experienced in his day. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* reflects this context quite evocatively, translating verses 25 and 26 : "It will seem like all hell has broken loose . . . everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be, quaking . . ."

It will seem like all hell has broken loose . . . But in the midst of this, Jesus says, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Don't cower under the proverbial sturdy wooden chair. Rather, stand up and raise your heads. Why? Because your redemption is near. Not the kind of redemption, mind you, heralded by an All Clear signal after a tornado has passed. Not the kind of redemption we like to think can be bestowed by fame or fortune, talent or intelligence, the triumph of a certain political agenda, strict adherence to a rigid set of religious doctrines, the absence of turmoil on the global stage, or even the eradication of COVID-19. No, the kind of redemption Jesus is talking about here—a redemption that really redeems— is the same kind he offers his disciples shortly before his death, when he assures them, "Peace I leave with you, my own peace I give to you: not as the world gives, give I to you" (John 14:27).

Well, strange peace, huh? Yes, and stranger redemption. A redemption that does not wait for a more auspicious time or a happier set of circumstances. A redemption that pops out of nowhere into the midst of outright catastrophe. A redemption that can arrive with power and great glory, the Son of Man coming in a cloud. Or a redemption that may arrive quietly, the plaintive cry of a baby born to a peasant couple living in subjection to a government dead set on silencing all dissent. However God's redemption comes, come it does.

There is no question about that. As one biblical scholar has observed, “God has the final word [about life] and it is a good one.”^[1]

It is a good one, which is wonderful news for you and me this day. For like the residents of Tornado Alley and those to whom Luke’s gospel was first addressed, we, too, know something about storms. We have endured a lot of them these past few years. We have experienced the relentless crashing of waves—waves of sickness and death, waves of fear and mistrust, waves of violence and oppression, waves of contempt for the foreigner and neglect of the poor. Waves of drug abuse and suicide. Waves of anger and hopelessness. We have battened down the hatches, trying to protect ourselves from the awful storm surge, again and again and again. We have waited for an All Clear, but the All Clear has not come.

And yet redemption *is* coming. This is the hope and the promise of Advent: that in Jesus, redemption is coming. It has come and it will come again. That in the midst of all that threatens to undo us, we don’t have to duck and cover anymore. We can unfold ourselves from the tight, tense, cramped, and unyielding positions we’ve been in for so long. We can stand up and raise our heads; we can look around, and we can look at each other. We can look for signs of God’s saving activity in our midst. Redemption is near.

I once read about a young woman who went grocery shopping and encountered a disturbing scene. As this woman was loading her purchases onto the conveyer belt, a man in the checkout line behind her started berating another customer who was speaking broken English and wearing a head covering. “Go home!” shouted the man. “Go home. We don’t want you here.” The young woman became anxious, not sure what to do. She wanted to say something in support of the person being attacked, but she was shy, and no one else in the store seemed concerned about what was happening. And so the man continued his tirade. The man continued his tirade until finally the young woman could stand it no more. “Somebody, look up!” she called out. “Please, anyone, look up! I have something to say, but I can’t do it alone, so look up if you’re with me.” There was a pause, the woman said, in which no one moved a muscle. But then, finally—finally—a man in the next line lifted his head and met her gaze.

The woman took his gesture as a sign, she said, that it was safe to speak and that she could find her voice. She moved closer to the individual being harassed, put an arm around her shoulders and said, “I am with you. You are not alone. You are safe. We’re glad you’re here.” Then something amazing happened: The man who had been spewing all those ugly words stopped. He picked up his bags and left the store. Other people began to surround the woman he had attacked and to offer her words of comfort. Someone paid for her groceries. Someone else walked her to her car. And all this because one person dared to look up. In a grocery store.^[2]

I wonder where in your life you are looking especially for redemption this Advent. Where in your life are you just barely holding on to hope? Wherever it is, the message of this season is, *Take heart! Stand up. Stand up and raise your head. Your redemption is drawing near.*

^[1] David Lose, davidlose.net; workingpreacher.org

^[2] I read this story on a social media site sometime during the past five or so years. I regret that I cannot recall the source.