

An evening time and a morning time (Jeremiah 33:12-16)

November 17, 2009

A year before my mother died, she heard her father call to her during the night. When I visited her in the nursing center, she said his voice was so clear that she answered and struggled to get up. This was the first sign that she would spend her final year of life in a twilight that blended past and present. At first I corrected her, but later I accepted her recollections of her day, about people—long dead—with whom she had chatted, and places—far away in time and distance—she'd visited. I've often wondered if she heard her father call again during that quiet December night when she died.

Twilight time. Celtic folk called it "the time between the times," the enchanted moments at dusk and at dawn when the veil between this world and the world beyond us is thin, and we seem to breathe its air. I felt it when I held my daughter for the first time. She may have felt it as she slept, dreaming of the watery, subterranean world she had just left.

The church exists to remind us that we live in the time between the times, between what is dying and what is being born, between the "already" of Christ's reign and the "not yet" of Advent. The church year draws us into a drama, but the pull of its narrative is not away from our lives but more deeply into them. I don't know how else to explain the squeeze of emotion in my throat when I hear words of comfort, like those of Jeremiah, directed to distant peoples run over by ancient history, or when I hear the first notes of tunes evoking promises to exiles. Devastation and exile are ever-contemporary realities that allow us entry into this holy moment.

Both Jeremiah and Jesus, separated by six centuries, stood on the streets of Jerusalem and announced its destruction. The announcement gave them no pleasure; it brought them both to tears. As Abraham Heschel said, a prophet is one who knows what time it is. Jeremiah knew that it was evening, time for Jerusalem's inhabitants to relinquish their hold on illusory hopes—alliances, piety and the pipe dreams of sunnier prophets—all paper matches against the gathering dark. After a long and terrible night, said Jeremiah, a brilliant morning would dawn and a generation of God's people would wake up in safety in a place renamed "justice."

When Jesus puts on the mantle of the prophet, he draws on prophetic imagery. Those in Jesus' audience had ears for apocalyptic language. As an occupied, dispirited people who felt they were on the wrong side of history, they were fine with envisioning history's end. Luke, whose audience knew the destruction of Jerusalem as a historical memory, took pains to separate Jesus' words of warning about that event from his warnings about the eschatological travails to come. Luke re-directs Jesus' words to his followers in all times and places and sings the melody of Advent: whatever devastation you experience is neither permanent nor ultimate, for "your redemption is drawing near."

In another way, though, the outlandish language of apocalypse—all that cosmic upheaval, all those heavenly signs—may be just right for conveying Jesus' central message to folks like us. We are as likely as any people have ever been to be "weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." Add modernity and secularity to the mix, and we are prime candidates for having our closed, numb worlds shaken. As Flannery O'Connor, chronicler of grace-full shaking, put it, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures."

In the dullness of our half-lived lives, Jesus startles us into wakefulness. "Stand up!" "Raise your heads!" "Look!" "Be alert!" These are more than just tips for surviving into the eschaton. They are a summons to larger life in a world immune to the holy and incapable of imagining possibilities outside itself. As in all the Synoptic accounts of this discourse, Jesus points to the fig tree, but in Luke he adds, "and all the trees." Any tree will do, because the signs are everywhere if we are alive to them. "Joy," said Simone Weil, "is the overflowing consciousness of reality." The semiconscious are shut off from the two great sources of healing in Advent: the grief that comprehends our circumstances, and the joy that calls to us like music from tomorrow.

"Jesus' ministry," says Walter Brueggemann in *The Prophetic Imagination*, "takes place between the clinging and the yearning." That's also where we find ourselves in Advent, in the "time between the times" when the veil between worlds grows thin and the holy calls to us from the world to come. It is both an evening time and a morning time, when we learn what we must relinquish and to what we must open our hands, what is dying and what is being born.