



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 2 December 2018
 Sermon: The Days Are Surely Coming
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Jeremiah 33:14-16
 Luke 21:25-36

Maria Meza is dressed in a shirt depicting Queen Elsa of Arendelle of the Disney film Frozen, with purples, blues, and whites swirling along in an enchanted pattern. The peaceful smile on Elsa’s cartoon face appearing at the top of this woman’s torso is strikingly out of place with the violence that encircles the rest of the photograph.¹ In each hand, Maria holds a different child’s forearm. One child, still in diapers, seems to be falling over, tripping over her pink flipflops but held up by the woman’s careful grasp. The other child looks just a bit older, maybe 4 or 5 – I can’t tell if it’s a boy or girl; their long hair is all in their face, covering the child’s eyes, but you can still see they are wide open, frightened. Maria’s own eyes are not on the camera. Her gaze is down, split between the two children, as she makes this twisting motion, like she’s changing direction very suddenly, making a fast escape. And you can see the cause of her escape in the left-hand corner of the photo. Immediately behind her is an exploding can of tear gas, the noxious cloud moves up and to the right of the picture, toward the woman and her children, the

¹ Chokshi, Niraj, “Reuters Photojournalist Talks About Photo of Children Fleeing Tear Gas at Border in Mexico,” *The New York Times*. Nov. 26, 2018. Accessed Dec. 2, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2DKMGLq>

one who is tripping over herself, still in diapers, and the other whose frightened eyes are hidden behind a mess of hair. In the background, behind the tear gas is a wall of razor wire, actually three rolls of razor wire, each stacked on top of the other, stretching from one end of the photo to the next. And behind that is the famous wall; it's high and rusted. Further back, partially obscured by the wall, and the razor wire, and the tear gas is the American flag, signifying the country whose border begins behind the wall, signifying the source of the tear gas. Though it's probably about half a mile from the family, the flag is set in the picture so that it stands directly above the woman from the photographer's point of view. The moment is such chaos, I can't imagine that this placement was purposeful, but the picture is framed just so: a woman runs from tear gas, babies in arms, directly below the flag. The caption below the photo reads "A migrant family running away from tear gas near the border wall between the United States and Mexico in Tijuana on Sunday." You see, the process for requesting and granting asylum has slowed to a halt in our country;² and in a moment of desperation, a few hundred people, rushed the wall seeking to flee violence and hunger and the desert; and

² Shear, Michael and Eileen Sullivan, "Trump Suspends Some Asylum Rights, Calling Illegal Immigration 'a Crisis'." New York Times. Nov. 9, 2018. Accessed Dec. 2, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2yZyc7m>

Note: This is a developing story: See Jordan, Miriam, "Federal Judge Blocks Trump's Proclamation Targeting Some Asylum Seekers." New York Times. Nov. 20, 2018. Accessed Dec. 2, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2zm3i9c>

they were met with tear gas. That was Sunday, a week ago, a week before the first Sunday of Advent, which is today.

This first Sunday of Advent, where we read the words of Jesus, “Your redemption is drawing near.”

That same day, about 2,000 miles away, my mother-in-law, my brother-in-law, and his girlfriend got in a car, leaving our home about 6:00 in the morning, beginning the 5-hour drive back home after a week together here in Asheville for the holiday. My mother-in-law is named Linda; she is a woman of high spirits, as extraverted as I am introverted, with few filters but certainly an optimist. The whole week, she had been going, and going, and going, talking and planning and reminiscing, crying and laughing, oftentimes at the same time, because she is grieving, because two and a half weeks ago, her 42-year-long marriage to my father-in-law Joe came to a sudden end when Joe went to the kitchen to make a sandwich and instead fell over dead almost instantly of a massive heart attack at the age of 72. Two and a half weeks after that night, she left our home, to go home to an empty house, a place that was quiet, to begin a life she had not planned for herself, that no one could have seen coming, at least not so soon. She went home to that empty house last Sunday, a week ago, a week before the first Sunday of Advent which is today.

This first Sunday of Advent, where we read the words of Jesus, “Your redemption is drawing near.”

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars,” says Jesus. “People will faint from fear and foreboding...[and] your redemption is drawing near.”

What signs have you been seeing?

- Maybe this week you were worried about your rent or your mortgage as the snow started to fall.
- Maybe this week you're a middle-aged parent worried about your young adult son or daughter who can't seem to find a job in this new economy.
- Or you're an adult child caring for an elderly parent who seems to need more care than either of you can afford these days.
- Maybe this week you're a high school senior wondering where on earth you're going to be next year, and what that choice will mean for the rest of your life.
- Maybe this week you and your spouse stopped talking to each other and you wondered if it was ever going to get any better.
- Maybe this week is the anniversary of a great loss that you're still grieving: Can you believe it's already been a year? 5 years? 10 years? You miss them every day.

- Maybe this week you fell into despair:
 - You fell into despair when a black veteran named EJ Bradford was shot in a mall, because he was there and he was black, so he looked suspect.³
 - You fell into despair when Samuel Oliver-Bruno, who has lived in this country for 22 years, was arrested, because he is undocumented, when he left a church in Durham where he had been seeking sanctuary for 11 months.⁴
 - You fell into despair when our government denied the reality of another climate report that said that vital changes must be made or else our children’s health, safety, and quality of life will be in peril.⁵

³ See Yan, Holly, “The Changing Police Narrative of Why a Black Man was Shot to Death in an Alabama Mall.” CNN. Nov. 27, 2018. Accessed Dec. 2, 2018.

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/27/us/alabama-mall-shooting-conflicting-police-accounts-trnd/index.html>

⁴ See Flynn, Meagan, “Feds Deport Undocumented Immigrant whose Church Supporters Went to Jail to Protect Him.” Washington Post. Nov. 30, 2018. Accessed Dec. 2, 2018.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/11/30/feds-deport-undocumented-immigrant-whose-church-supporters-went-jail-protect-him>

⁵ USGCRP, 2018: *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume II* [Reidmiller, D.R., C.W. Avery, D.R. Easterling, K.E. Kunkel, K.L.M. Lewis, T.K. Maycock, and B.C. Stewart (eds.)]. U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC, USA. doi: 10.7930/NCA4.2018.

<https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/front-matter-about/>

- You fell into despair, or you gave up, you stopped caring and you grew numb, because it's all so much, "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations."

These signs of brokenness, entropy – They're all around us. So "stand up and raise your heads," says Jesus, "Because your redemption is drawing near."

I am drawn to apocalyptic thinking right now, but not because I'm a pessimist. Quite the opposite, because the promise of this Scripture is that God draws near to us in the worst of times. Jeremiah proclaimed, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." But when he made that proclamation, those houses stood in ruin, a nation torn apart by the Babylonian invasion, the Babylonians who destroyed the temple and marched most of Israel off to exile. Five hundred years later, when Jesus said, "When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is drawing near," he was only 2 chapters away from the cross. No one would ever accuse Jeremiah or Jesus to be dreamy eyed optimists with their heads in the clouds. They were at the epicenter of loss and grief, and yet they proclaimed that God is close, that God is holding you close, that God empowers us, even when it seems all is lost. They told us to choose hope and not despair, to engage rather than give up, to stand up, as they stood up, and proclaim that when

things fall apart, God's presence stands steady alongside us. God with us.

Emmanuel.

On a hot St. Louis Tuesday in June, hundreds of Presbyterian lay leaders and ministers left a convention center and marched to the local courthouse carrying an orange sign that said "Freedom should be free," carrying signs that said, "Black Lives Matter," carrying signs that said "Fight poverty, not the poor."⁶ They marched toward overcrowded prisons filled with people waiting trial, deemed eligible for bail but unable to find the means to pay their bail. They marched for people who were in prison because they were too poor to pay their way out. They marched with \$47K in hand to release as many captives as they could. "It is a message for people who are in chains right now that we will be with you. We'll come into the jails if we have to and we will shout and make demands with you. We're not free until you are," said Michelle Higgins, who helped organize the march. For some, it was their first march, empowered by their fellow Presbyterians, empowered by the Spirit's cry to stand up and raise our heads. They marched and they put a dent in a system that would continue and does continue to disproportionately, adversely affect the poor and people with black and brown skin. They marched because they believed that in times of trial, "when there are

⁶ Jones, Rick, "Hundreds of Presbyterians join march to St. Louis' Justice Center." The Presbyterian Outlook. June 19, 2018. Accessed Dec. 2, 2018. <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2018/6/19/hundreds-presbyterians-join-march-st-louis-justice/>

signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,” that God is nonetheless drawing near, that we as Jesus followers are called to be signs and reminders and workers of the God of peace who is drawing near, even when it all seems to be falling apart.

That was this past June, only six months ago. They marched in the summer but they were Advent people, people following the savior who proclaimed, that when things get worse, you “Stand up and rise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The promise of advent, this season of expectation, is not utopian, or escapist; it’s not an illusion or a fantasy. The promise does not ask you to ignore your grief or the world’s suffering. Rather, the promise empowers you to proclaim, in word, in deed, and in hope: that God is here, that God draws us close.

- God close to those who mourn, so that they might find the resilience to go on.
- God close to those who have given up, that they might find the strength to start again.
- God close to those who fear, or who worry, that they would know they are not alone.
- God close to yet another heartbroken African American mother, who finds strength to demand justice.

- God close to the refugees fleeing tear gas, who shield their families, even after crossing a continent to get here.
- God close to you, wherever you are, to empower you to show others that God's love is real, that it has changed your life, that it can change this world.

Raise your heads, O Advent people, because your redemption is drawing near.