

First Sunday in Advent – c
December 3, 2006
Luke 21:25-36
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

READING THE STARS

You can't help but wonder about the future.

Perhaps the alignment of the stars can reveal something about what's ahead for us. Maybe that's why so many people read their horoscopes. Or go to psychics to have their palms read. We are even curious what the message with our fortune cookie will be.

The future that James Loney had to face is unimaginable for us. About one year ago James was abducted in Iraq, along with three other members of the Christian Peacemaker Teams. During the four months that the men were held, their captors threatened to kill them unless the Iraqi government freed its prisoners and U.S. and British forces left Iraq.

James eloquently writes about his days in captivity.¹ The 1,000 pound question mark of their future was this: Would they be killed, tortured, released tomorrow, held for years, or disappear forever.

James prayed. He prayed for each person he knew. He prayed for deliverance. But the acute, heart-pounding terror of the early days progressed into chronic white noise. Boredom became the great enemy. It was like a living hell where James could be self-absorbed, irritated with everything. Like a fellow team member's wiggling toes, burps, small talk. Every moment James had a choice: withdraw or open his heart and be generous with acceptance, conversation and listening.

Another team member, Tom Fox, would eventually be killed and his body dumped in a Baghdad neighborhood. But James remembers Tom as the prophet of the present moment. Tom would say: "All we have is now. The past is fiction and the future doesn't exist." With his whole being Tom tried to let go of everything—even the hope of release, in order to just be present to the present.

What will the future hold? We know how everything can change in a moment. It can be bad news or good news. We can lose a job or get an offer. We can learn of a terrible illness or be given a clean bill of health. A relationship can end or we can meet someone who changes our lives forever. No wonder Woody Allen once said: How to make God laugh—tell him your future plans.

But you can't help but wonder about the future. What's in store for us? What will happen to our world? What will happen to the Church, to those who follow Christ?

As a new church year begins, we are directed to the future. The readings on the First Sunday in Advent are always about the Second Coming of Christ. Outside these walls you may be hearing songs and carols about the baby Jesus, but inside them today we're hearing some pretty serious stuff about the end of the world.

That may be fine and good, you say, but the future I'm thinking about is the next three weeks. All the stuff I need to get done: the cards, the gifts, the decorations, the parties. There's no time for star-gazing. I've got lists to attend to.

And yet these words catch us off guard. There will be signs in the sun, and the moon, and the stars, Jesus says. You've got to admit that this time of year is about the turning of the earth around the sun. We are weeks away from the winter solstice. The days are short. They're getting colder. And for some of us, that's hard to deal with.

But I don't think that's what Jesus is talking about. He goes on: There will be distress among nations. People will faint from fear. They will be confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

Cosmic changes. That's what the news is all about. Global warming. Nations at war. The tsunami in 2004. Hurricanes Rita and Katrina in 2005. Could it be the end of the world? Could Jesus' words be coming true?

One man in his 70's remembers as a child hearing a grown man comment on all the troubles of the world and saying: "This must be the end time!" But now that child is an adult and the world is still going on. The early Christians thought that Jesus would return in their lifetime. And now it's 2000 years later. So how shall we read the stars? How shall we think about the future?

Today's gospel can seem like bad news. The world is a pretty messed up place. But Jesus announces good news, not only to those listening to him 2000 years ago, but to us today. Stand tall. Raise your heads. Your redemption is drawing near.

We still wait for the fulfillment of that promise. Yet we trust God's faithfulness.

Several weeks from now we will hear about a star. A star that leads the magi to the savior of the nations. Into our broken and violent world God comes. Peace comes. Hope comes. Not only then, but this day. In word and meal, and in this Advent gathering.

The blue of this Advent space and Advent hymns in a minor key get our attention. They invite us to live with expectation. Christ is coming soon. But what we really know is that all we have is this present moment, this present day of grace.

Last December the four Christian Peacemaker Team members tried not to think of their families laboring through Christmas without them. The men sang 36 Christmas carols from memory. And James choked tears at the words of the Christmas gospel: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all the people... Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace."

It's hard to imagine facing such a dark future and then to be released into the dawn of freedom. Last March James and the two other surviving team members were granted freedom. James writes that what he has learned is this: "We are born to be born, again and again, every day in every moment in every decision, big or small, regardless of where we are or what is happening to us. And peace—the birthright, the manger and swaddling cloths of every human being ... I have to cherish as the dearest and most essential of all things, even more (I say with fear and trembling) than life itself."

Signs in the sun, and the moon and the stars. Signs of hope and expectation.

¹ *118 Days* by James Loney. *Sojourners magazine*, December 2006, pp. 12 – 22.