

The Rev. Anne Michele Turner
Advent 1, Year C (November 28, 2021)
Luke 21:25-36
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, Virginia

I want to talk to you this morning about what it's like to have your head bowed down, and what it means to lift it up.

I have gotten used to hearing bad news. I think many of us have. I still pick up a print newspaper from my sidewalk every morning, and even though it's gotten smaller over the years it feels really heavy. What am I going to find when I open it? I spread it out on the kitchen table and hang my head over it, looking at the ups and downs of the COVID graph.

I have gotten used to hearing bad news, and so it was hard to read the gospel, because it sounded so familiar. There will be distress on earth among nations. The environment will be out of whack. Fear and foreboding? Absolutely. I had a friend write me a few months ago, in complete seriousness, to ask if this is how it all begins to end. I wasn't quite sure what to say. It wasn't a joke.

And yet: in our bad news, Jesus insists on good news. And to our bowed down heads, Jesus says something that sounds very strange: "When these things take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

What?

On the surface, this makes no sense. The pain of the earth does not make me glad. Rising sea levels do not give me comfort. Disease and corruption and conflict do not set my heart at ease. We are not supposed to be happy about any of this, are we?

But I have come to believe that we do not lift up our heads because we are cheered by any of this news. We do not lift up our heads as a consequence to this news. We are lifting up our heads because we are going to respond to it. We lift up our heads because that is what the people of God do in dark times.

It is so tempting to give in to the weight, isn't it? Jesus knows all about what it's like to live in fear, and he understands the temptation of cynicism and disengagement and despair: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down."

He knows it—and he reminds us that we are supposed to be different, when we are his people. We are *able* to be different, when we are his people. Because when we are the people of Jesus, we know the whole story—not just the bad news of the moment, but the good news that encompasses of all time. We belong to the one who is all about raising up—raising up the dead from the tomb, raising up life from the barren dirt, raising up all the things what have been made broken and finding ways for them to become whole.

This is part of what it means to be Christian. We don't pretend that the world is better than it is. But we refuse to believe that it is beyond saving. We know it is our job to step up, over and over, and insist on redemption.

Maybe it's been a good morning and you feel strong and ready. And maybe you are wondering how it's possible to get out of bed yet again and try all over. Most of us have both kinds of days. The promise I hear in the way Jesus is talking today is that it's not really about us or our limited powers. It's about the power of the redemption that is being offered to us.

It is our job to hope. Hope takes strength. And we find that strength in Jesus.

You all know that a few months ago I added some words before we received that eucharist: Behold what you are. May we become what we receive. It is for this work that I added those words. Living in this stormy world is really hard. Being able to offer hope takes so much strength, doesn't it? And my strength isn't enough, and neither is yours. But the strength of Jesus is. And so we ask to hold that strength in us, to become Christ's body in a moment that needs to see that God has not abandoned it.

It is the work of Christians to look for the world to come. We say it every week. And what that means, I think, is not reading the stars for signs of the end times. It's trusting that God is not done with this world, that God will come again in some strange and mysterious way to share it with us. And so we can't forget that we are making a place that we and God will inhabit together. We are preparing a place where we can be at home with God. We keep our eyes on that ending.

What does it take for you to raise up your head right now? A lot of us have gotten by for a very long time now by keeping our heads down. We avoid the conflict. We only look at what is manageable. We play it small, and we play it safe. We let our weariness become a coping strategy.

We are better than this.

Jesus asks better of us, and Jesus offers better to us. Because he shows us the possibility of living with courage—literally, living with heart. He shows us what it's like when we know that we are loved in a way that that can't be shaken. He shows us what it looks like when we have hope.

This is the good news today. Hope is our good news that cannot be erased or written over or drowned out. Hope is the nature of our God, and I believe it is supposed to be our nature as God's people.

So raise up your heads. Be the people God has asked you to be. It is God's gift to you, and it is God's challenge for you, and it is God's promise to you. Raise up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near, and it is your job and your joy to greet it.