

Advent 1: Reason for Hope
by Jeff Taylor
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“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare . . . For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

This good word from the Master of the Universe came to Judean captives in Babylon through Jeremiah, recorded just a few chapters ahead of the passage that Donny just read for us. “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you for in its welfare you will find yours.” In Judah’s case they found their welfare years later in unexpected clemency from a Persian king; but in the interim also in writing down, really for the first time, Moses’ law which would be at the centre of Jewish life forever after.

Out of the welfare that we have sought for our cities we also have found our own welfare. I don’t believe most people fully recognize the extent to which the welfare of humankind is increasing: shortly we will attempt to quantify some of that.

The source of human welfare is God who is goodness in her very nature, and who embodied that goodness in the life of Jesus, the righteous branch who sprang up from his ancestor David and who causes justice and righteousness in our world. He causes it by inspiring us to see the world as he sees it and to follow his example of sacrifice and grace.

How exactly this justice, righteousness, and reciprocated human kindness are to come about in any ultimate sense is less clear, even in Luke’s explanation.

The passage we heard earlier from Luke 21 has three sections: a warning that things will be unsettled before the “Son of Man” appears; a supporting parable concerning a fig tree; and finally an encouragement to stay sharp for the tough times ahead.”

Luke gets this basic structure and a fair amount to the wording from Mark’s much earlier gospel. But there are changes that are certainly intentional. Let’s look at the two gospels side by side.

Display Luke 21:2-36 cp. to Mark 13: 24-37

<http://sites.utoronto.ca/religion/synopsis/meta-4g.htm>

- Mark has destruction and devolvement; Luke simply says there will be “signs”

- Mark: "he" is coming imminently; Luke: the Kingdom is near

- Mark: a moment of judgement is coming suddenly; Luke: don't turn to pain relief, stay sharp and strong to endure.

Luke seems less certain than Mark that Jesus is to return imminently in the midst of chaos to judge and rescue. Luke simply says there will be signs that the Kingdom is coming closer and that we are to straighten up and keep going.

This ratcheting down of apocalyptic energy in Luke's version addresses the needs of his audience living after the destruction of the last of the Jewish temples and the expulsion of Jews and many Christians from Jerusalem. That event and the ongoing exile of Jews and Christians may have been seen by some as at least one of the future apocalyptic (revealing) events that Jesus had been referring to 60 years earlier. No, the moon had not literally turned to blood, but perhaps there had been a super moon like the one we experienced this fall. Celestial events were often taken as "signs" of significant events taking place on earth. Witness the "star in the east" of which Luke has previously written. Or maybe the reverse is the case, with dramatic events on earth being referred to allegorically as signs in the "heavens" (as in, in places of power). Either way, Jesus had not yet returned to rescue or sustain the suffering exiles; much less to establish a kingdom of peace. How can Luke explain this delay to his people living just a decade or two on this side of the destruction of the temple?

Is Luke hinting at a more elastic gauging of the timing of Jesus' return? But if he is, why does he retain Mark's claim that, "this generation will not pass away till all these things have taken place." By Luke's time that generation is nearly gone. So why does he repeat the claim? I don't know. Maybe the word "generation" is to be interpreted allegorically in some way.

And what can I say to you two thousand years later to account for Jesus delay?

At this point only a fool would continue to insist that significant geo-political events point to Jesus' imminent return. In some way Jesus will return; in some way we expect God to make it all very good again. But precisely how or when remains a mystery.

Anyway, all we need to know is that Jesus is in the process of returning. I mean, we are the kingdom of God, are we not? So if we are actively working for the welfare of the city, are we not beginning to make the earth very good again? Are we not causing the Kingdom of God to descend to earth. Aren't we doing that with our efforts on behalf of the under-served refugee slaves we hope to liberate through the work of Aurora House?

Or does it feel like a losing battle to you? Do the violent attacks that you hear about on a 24-7 news cycle overwhelm you? I admit that I am torn between encouraging my students to take in more news and warning them to absorb less. Too much sad news

can become debilitating when poorly balanced against good news. We refuse to pay for good news so no one finds it useful to try to sell it to us. But there is good news, there is reason for hope. And we need to know it so we can put sad news in perspective so we don't become discouraged and quit while we were succeeding but didn't know we were.

And the good news isn't just about some heaven light-years away; it's about this planet and these people we share it with.

Let's look at the big picture by looking at some hard evidence. Let's start with this idea that we live in a world of mounting poverty and misery. For those who haven't met him, let me introduce you to Swedish statistician and health policy analyst, Hans Rosling.

Play video 200 Countries in 200 Years

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkSRLYSojo>

Yes, there is more work to do: things didn't improve as much as they did accidentally. But there has been improvement. Dr. Rosling does a Ted Talk in which he illustrates how plummeting birth rates in India, China, and other high population centres mean that the global population will likely level off at a sustainable 10 to 11 billion in the next 30 years.

But what about all the warfare and violence? Some of the young people here have been hearing about western allies waging war in the middle east for their entire lives. Does it ever stop?

Please meet Neil Halloran, data visualizationist and documentary film maker. Haloran depicts the story of war globally over centuries of conflict. He begins the story with WWII. I am going to skip much of the first half which goes into more detail than we need right now, so bear with me as we select just three chunks to watch together.

Play sections of video The Fallen of WWII

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWjgrYrvp1g>

Recognizing that geopolitical trends are complex, it none-the-less seems fair to say that people are healthier, live longer, are better educated, are freer, and are less likely to kill one another than ever before. There's no guarantee that this trend will continue; it has been our effort that has made our world a more humane place and that effort must continue. But has not God's grace been at work in our world as well? Which of those efforts deserve the greatest credit for drawing the Kingdom of God nearer can be discussed at length. But projects like Aurora House play an important part in ushering in God's reign. So, while we wait for the master to come, let us ready the world for

him. Let us demonstrate our faithfulness by continuing to show up for the work of the Kingdom. Blessing and peace be yours and the whole world's.