

## Advent: Light for Our Darkness

Ruth Haley Barton

*“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the wave. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then we will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory...”*

Luke 21:25-36

First Sunday of Advent

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent is an alarming one—full of violent images and ominous predictions. It is not the one I would pick to kick off Advent—this holy and gentle season of quiet waiting. I, for one, am anxious to get to the good stuff and this seems like a very harsh beginning.

If it wasn't for the discipline of following the lectionary schedule for reading Scripture in moments of private and public worship, I would not be reading and reflecting on this passage right now. There is a part of me that wants to avoid the uncomfortable realities represented here—especially during this blessed season that falls between Thanksgiving and Christmas. But the truth is, the scenario described in Luke 21 is much closer to real life than the dreamy images of beautiful angels, lowing cattle and a gentle mother nursing the Christ-child that we often associate with the Christmas season. At the global level, our days and nights are filled with images of the very dynamics described here: the unresolved tensions of clashing nations, violent interpersonal conflict, the roaring of sea and tsunami waves and hurricane flooding. At a more personal level, we are plagued by our own confusion and distress about conflicts we can't resolve, questions

we can't answer, failures among ourselves and others that cause us to question the very Gospel message that we preach.

Now that I have gotten over my resistance to this passage and have allowed myself to settle here, I realize that it is exactly where I need to be. This passage helps me to be honest about my life and those places that are full of confusion and distress, fear and foreboding. This passage tells me that it is in these very places where I am to wait for the Christ, the Son of glory, to come into my life with the power to heal and glory to illumine my darkness.

Advent is the season of waiting for Christ to bring light into the darkest places of my life. It is a time for courage. This Scripture says that when we become aware of the darkness in us and around us, it not the time to run away and hide our heads in the sand. It is a time to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near. It is a time to be on guard, to be alert, and to refuse to be distracted by everything going on around us so that we can recognize the nearness of Christ in that very place that feels desolate, confusing and beyond hope.

And so we thank God for this waiting time—for we wait, not as those who have no hope, but as those who have great faith that we seek a God who comes into every space we create for him. So where is the place of your own distress and confusion, your own fear and foreboding? Do you have the courage to wait for the coming of Christ there in that place?

*You keep us waiting.  
You, the God of all time,  
want us to wait  
for the right time in which to discover  
who we are, where we must go,  
who will be with us, and what we must do.  
**So thank you...for the waiting time.***

*You keep us looking.  
You, the God of all space,  
want us to look in the right and wrong places  
for signs of hope,  
for people who are hopeless,  
for visions of a better world that will appear  
among the disappointments of the world we know.*

*You keep us loving.  
You, the God whose name is love,  
Want us to be like you—  
to love the lovely and the unlovely and the unlovable;  
to love without jealous or design or threat;  
and, most difficult of all,  
to love ourselves.  
**So thank you...for the loving time.***

*And in all this,  
you keep us.  
Through hard questions with no easy answers;  
Through failing where we had hoped to succeed  
and making impact where we felt we were useless;  
through the patience and the dreams and the love of others;  
and through Jesus Christ and his Spirit,  
you keep us.  
**So thank you...for the keeping time,  
and for now  
and forever,  
Amen***

Iona Community Worship Book, 1988

©Ruth Haley Barton, 2006

Ruth Haley Barton is co-founder of the Transforming Center. A spiritual director, teacher and retreat leader, she is the author of spiritual formation books and resources including *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* and *Sacred Rhythms*.

This article is not to be reproduced without the express permission of the author or The Transforming Center.