

[Advent 1c.09 Christ Church, Las Vegas](#)

It has been a hard year for a lot of us. It has been a hard year for this congregation. It has probably been hard for some of you personally. We are at war and in the deepest financial slump since the 30's. For a lot of us, this year has been fraught with anxiety teetering on the edge of despair.

It has been the kind of time Jesus described in today's lesson, "distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People . . . faint with fear and foreboding

" Jesus means the distress that happens in world affairs, in a congregation, a family, or our individual hearts. Things fall apart and we "faint with fear and foreboding."

But Jesus says that is the precise moment when the Son of Man shows up in glory to usher in a new and better life.

The same pattern recurs at all levels in world affairs, the lives of congregations, families. I'm going to tell a congregation story, but the point applies to whatever level of your life may be "distressed" and "confused."

St. Peter's by the Sea was a venerable old Episcopal Church, in downtown Gulfport, Mississippi. Like the other downtown churches of Gulfport, it had been in decline for years as the neighborhood deteriorated. Then they lost everything in a single night when Hurricane Katrina washed them away. They not only lost their buildings. They lost half their congregation for the time being -- 35% of their congregation permanently.

The other downtown churches, the Catholics, the Presbyterians, the Methodists and the rest all took this opportunity to move to the suburbs. But St. Peter's did some discernment. They claimed their identity as a downtown church and instead of abandoning their neighborhood; they began organizing the community to reinvent itself. Instead of following their neighborhood into decline, they decided to lead their neighborhood to new life. It was the sort of thing we are trying to do here with the Las Vegas Interfaith Organizing Committee.

It was a bold decision. Their rector, naturally, encouraged them and was the leader in making this brave commitment. He then promptly left them for another church. So they had to rebuild their church, restore their neighborhood, and do a search process all at the same time.

They did not get a bailout from anyone. They found the resources in their own congregation for the huge construction project. In fact, they expanded their seating capacity by 30%. They replaced the folks they lost with a strong evangelism effort. Their membership is back where it was and growing each week. About the rector, they were a traditionalist congregation. So they made a few things clear to the search committee. No women and no young priests. They wanted a respectable man with silver temples. They have just called a dynamic 32 year old woman as their new rector. Today, St. Peter's by the Sea is a whole new word of God speaking in Mississippi.

Jesus said, when there is “distress” “confusion” and people “faint from fear and foreboding” that is precisely when our “redemption is drawing near.” It doesn’t just happen somewhere far away. Your sister church, Trinity, Reno, was in disarray just a year ago. They had run 6 digit deficits for several years in a row.

Vestry members were resigning and leaving for other churches. Staff members were in tumult. Membership and pledging were spiraling downward.

Now, a year later, they are back. Attendance, stewardship, service to the community -- all the signs of healthy vitality you could ask for. How does that happen? It’s a God thing. In my personal life, I know all too well what it’s like to shake with fear and foreboding. I know what it’s like to be in real trouble and then exacerbate my trouble with catastrophic fantasies about impending disaster.

Then, to my utter amazement, God has stepped in to make my life better than I had ever dreamed possible. Unfortunately, the next time I get in trouble, I usually forget what happened last time and revert to catastrophic fantasies. But, little by little, I am getting better, learning faith. The spasms of anxiety and despair are getting shorter. I am quicker to remember that God works wonders -- invariably in ways I could not foresee.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus gives us a whole way of responding to disasters. He says, “Stand up and raise your heads” “Stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near.” Advent is the season to open our hearts to hope. But hope runs contrary to our customary way of dealing with hardships.

Philosopher and literary critic Rene Girard has given us the most complete understanding we have of why we never seem to get what we want and why human life is so full of muddle and conflict. We could spend a whole day learning Rene Girard’s philosophy, but the important thing for our Advent spirituality is what he says about how human nature responds to hard times.

Our basic reflex is to focus on the ruin and find someone to blame. When we fall into fear and foreboding mode, that’s when we begin fault finding, blame shifting, and scape-goating. Those responses fracture our community, our family, and our own psyches. They keep us stuck. They are the best way possible to block God’s grace and avoid constructive action that moves us forward.

That’s how it was in Jesus’ day. Judah’s neck was under the boot heel of Rome. So the Sadducees blamed the Pharisees who blamed the Zealots who blamed the Essences who blamed everybody.

Jesus taught a different way. Instead of blaming, he taught forgiving. Instead of despair, he taught hope. Instead of fear, he taught faith. “Stand up and raise your heads for your redemption is drawing near.” “Be alert at all times,” he said. Keep an eye out for grace, for miracle and wonder. It happens. Don’t miss it.

In today's Epistle, St. Paul tells us what this hopeful grace-alert attitude means for our relationships with each other. "Abound in love for one another." That's one of my favorite verbs – "abound." It's a cornucopia word. Abundance. It isn't stingy. Instead of rationing love for those who deserve it and blaming those who don't, we practice generosity of caring. We practice appreciating each other, enjoying each other.

In hard times, we can follow what Rene Girard says is the course of human nature – fault finding and criticizing. Or we can take another course. Girard says the gospel message delivers us from the trap of blame and shame. The Gospel is the best way ever conceived to deliver us from the liability gridlock and set us free for abundant life. Instead of fault finding and criticizing, we can abound in love and welcome God's grace.

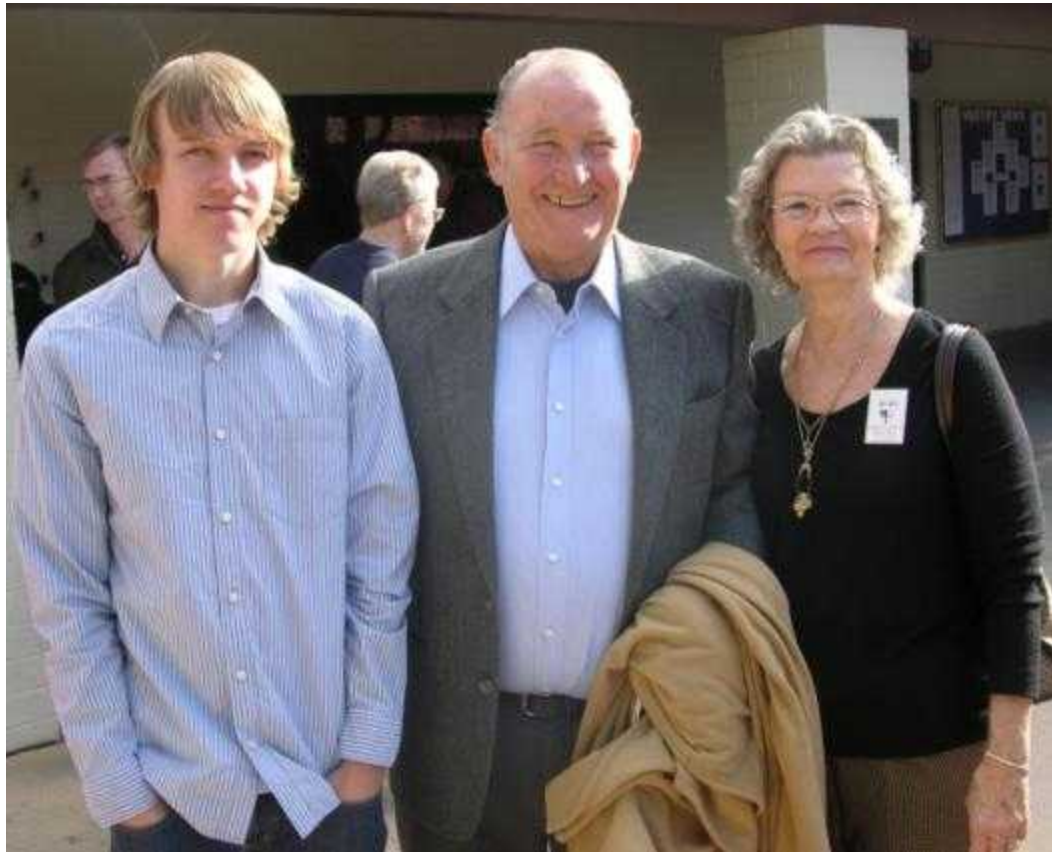
That's what they did at St. Peter's by the Sea in Gulfport, Mississippi. It's what Christians have been doing in the face of hardship for 2000 years.

A lot of grace has come along through the centuries. That grace has brought new life, new mercy, and new joy. God's grace will do all of that again for us if we let it.

Advent is the season to prepare our hearts for grace. It is the season to let go of our tired old habits, the time to sweep out the stable for the baby. It is time to drop old grievances, old criticisms. Advent is the season to surrender Monday morning quarterbacking. It is a quiet season for letting go of the past, not a strenuous time of making things happen. We don't even have to envision a future. We just trust that there is one and the only way we can get there is together.

"Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."

Amen.



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Confirmed 11/29/09 Confirmed 11/29/09 Reaffirmed 11/29/09



Samuel Peter McKibben
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