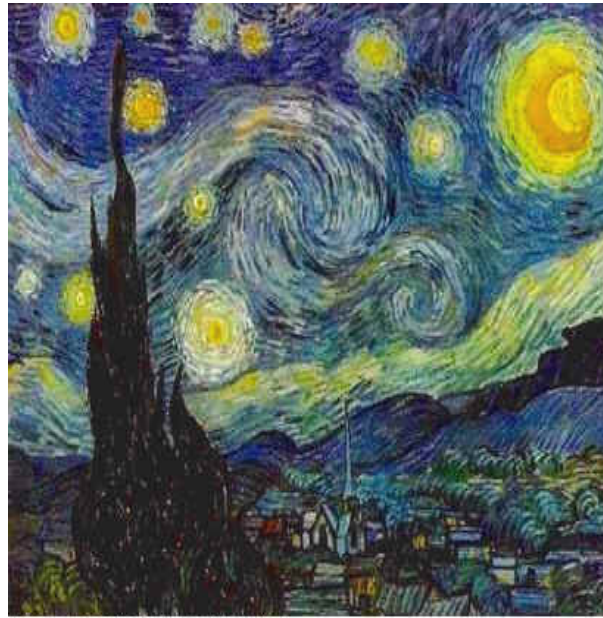


THE STARRY NIGHT

Luke 21:25-36



Museum of Modern Art, New York

I've asked the ushers to pass out a small print of Vincent Van Gogh's famous painting, *the Starry Night* especially to go with Jesus' apocalyptic words in today's Gospel. Van Gogh has given us a vision of an apocalyptic sky full of possibility and power, of movement and foreboding. I see three distinct movements within the painting. There is the dark, brooding presence of a Cyprus tree (associated in Van Gogh's time with cemeteries and mourning) dominating the foreground. And then we have the quiet still town and the beautiful hills in the background. At the center of the town is a striking steeple. Finally, dominating the picture, eleven stars and a crescent moon light up a dizzying, swirling night sky. The stars and moon seem alive and full of movement. Something dramatic seems to be happening up there in the heavens; we may not know what, but seen through Van Gogh's paint brush, the sky is alive. Van Gogh's famous painting elicits different reactions from those who admire it. Some see it as a daunting image of a frightening sky, others as something bold and beautiful, others as a glimpse of God.

Jesus' apocalyptic words in today's Gospel are likewise full of foreboding and movement. The Son of Man will be seen coming in the clouds. The heavens will be shaken. There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars as well as distress among nations, confusion and fear. Like Van Gogh's painting, Jesus' words elicit different reactions from those who admire them. Some hear words of terror and fear. Others hear words of hope and encouragement in the midst of troubling times. Some look for the end of the world; others for the beginning of a new world yet to come. Some hear God's judgment and wrath; others hear God's strength and possibility.

Jesus spoke these words of prophesy as some among the crowd listening to him in Jerusalem were admiring the beautiful artistry and adornment of the Temple. Jesus predicted that not one stone of the Temple would be left upon another, but all would be thrown down. The whole city of Jerusalem would be destroyed. The Gospel writer Luke recorded these timely words of Jesus just after they had come true. The Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and tore down the Temple to its foundation in 70 AD. It was a terribly fearful time for Jews and Christians. In the midst of the terrible uncertainty of those times Luke recalled Jesus' words of hope: "*now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" And then again, a few verses later, "*when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.*" (Luke 21:28 & 31)

We live in our own uncertain and fearful times. War may not be at our doorsteps but our country is involved in not one but two wars. Terrorism is an undeclared war without boundaries that affects us at home and all over the world. Unemployment is now in double digits affecting not only the many people in our parish who are out of work, but also those who live under the constant threat that their jobs may be the next to go, and all who have to work longer hours at a frantic pace to make up for those who have been downsized. We wash our hands with antiseptics before entering or exiting a public place for fear of the flu. We are told that the economy has started to recover and we hope it's true, but many of us fear a further collapse. Bank failures, lack of health insurance, global warming and continued degradation of the world environment are terrifying realities. These are the distress among nations and roaring of the sea and the waves of our own times.

It was at just such times as these that Jesus told us to "*stand up and raise our heads for our redemption is drawing near.*" Now is when he told us to "*know that the Kingdom of God is near.*"

Advent announces the time of God's coming. Today we begin the new Church Year with the first Sunday of Advent. It is a time of expectation, longing and waiting. To me Advent is the recognition that we as Christian people live in a time between the times. We live between the time of Jesus' coming into the world to redeem the world and claim all people as his own beloved children, and the time when he comes again to rule forever. As we will declare in the Eucharistic Prayer B, "*We remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, we await his coming in glory.*" We recognize that the *Kingdom of God* is among us, that God's Kingdom is bubbling up like yeast hidden in dough, but at the same time we yearn for God's Kingdom still to come when his rule will be fully established on the earth. We live in this world now and we hope for the world to come. We are an Advent people, who have been healed and forgiven through the gift of Christ's first coming into the world and shedding his life for us sinners and who wait with longing for his coming again. We live in the time between times when Jesus told us to *look up* for our redemption is drawing near.

As Advent people Jesus calls us to *hope*. For me hymn #665 in our hymnal comprises the most wonderful poem on the meaning of hope.

*All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew,
me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone, calls my heart to be his own.*

*Mortal pride and earthly glory, sword and crown betray our trust;
though with care and toil we build them, tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower.*

*God's great goodness e'er endureth, deep his wisdom passing thought:
splendor, light, and life attend him, beauty springeth out of nought.
Evermore from his store newborn worlds rise and adore.*

*Still from earth to God eternal sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising for the gift of Christ, his son.
Christ doth call one and all: ye who follow shall not fall.*

Our hope is in God. Our hope is in the One who created us in his own image, in the One who came to earth and died in our place in order that we might be forgiven and washed clean. Our hope is in the One who promises to be with us even to the end of the age. Our hope is in the One who will be victorious at the end of this age, who no matter what horrible evils the world produces will still be the victor. Our hope is in the Light that shines brightly in the darkness. Our hope is in the Lord who taught us to love our neighbor as our-self. Our hope is in the Lord who healed the sick, who opened the eyes of the blind, who healed the lame, who proclaimed good news to the poor and raised the dead to life. Our hope is in the One who died that we might live. Our hope is in the One whom death could not hold. Our hope is in the One who waits for us on the other side of this life to welcome us into his eternal Kingdom.

In the midst of our own uncertain times Jesus invites us to lift up your head *and hope*. When everything is going wrong, lift up your head *and hope*. When you are going through a time of profound discouragement, lift up your head *and hope*. When you are full of doubt and uncertainty, lift up your head *and hope*. When you struggle with loss or illness or sadness, lift up your head *and hope*. When you are most afraid, lift up your head *and hope*. Let *hope* in God lead you to endurance and fortitude, to courage and perseverance, and to joy even in the midst of darkness and despair.

As we look into the swirling *starry night*, which looks like an apocalyptic vision of our own time, Jesus invites us to keep alert, to be constantly preparing and continuing to put our *hope* on the one who gives us life and love and forgiveness and healing and peace. We are an Advent people who look to Christ as our ultimate source of hope. We *look up* and we do not despair. For we know that in Christ our hope is drawing near.

Amen.