

God of Holiness, guard our hearts from despair so that we, in the company of the faithful and by the power of your Holy Spirit, may be found ready to raise our heads and our voices at the coming near of our redemption, the day of Jesus. Amen.

December 2, 2018 – Luke 21:25-36

“No More Silent Night: Silence Equals Death”

Two hundred years ago, the popular Christmas carol, “Silent Night,” came into being. Its premier took place on Christmas Eve in the St. Nicholas church of Oberndorf near Salzburg, performed by its creators, Franz Gruber and Joseph Mohr. Its lyrics, familiar to many, begin with the words, “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.”

But all is not calm today, nor is it bright. Thirty-three-year-old transwoman Roxsana Hernández Rodríguez was looking for a better life when she came to America seeking asylum. She was fleeing brutality in her native Honduras but died earlier this year at the hands of the for-profit prison industry that had held her captive since her arrival. She was being held in an ICE facility in New Mexico. “Trans people in my neighborhood are killed and chopped into pieces, then dumped inside potato bags,” Roxsana had said a month before her death. “I didn’t want to come to Mexico—I wanted to stay in Honduras but I couldn’t... They kill trans people in Honduras. I’m scared of that.” She had been gang raped by four members of the MS-13 gang and contracted HIV during the attack. So she journeyed thousands of miles fleeing persecution and torture at home only to be met with neglect and torture in this country’s for-profit human cages. Autopsy results have shown that Roxsana died of severe untreated dehydration and had been beaten before her death. According to other detainees who were with Roxsana, diarrhea and vomiting episodes persisted over multiple days with no medical evaluation or treatment, until she was gravely ill. When she was finally hospitalized, she was admitted with symptoms of pneumonia, dehydration and complications associated with HIV. An autopsy revealed “Deep bruising” on her hands and abdomen, “indicative of blows, and/or kicks, and possible strikes with a blunt object.” An accompanying diagram showed several thin long bruises along her back and sides as if she had been hit with a baton. Roxsana Hernández Rodríguez traveled over 2000 miles for more than six weeks to America seeking asylum and safety. She was taken into immediate custody when she arrived at the border. Less than three weeks after surviving the journey and arriving in America, she was dead. (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2018/11/trans-asylum-seeker-beaten-died-severe-dehydration-ice-custody/>) All is not calm today, nor is it bright today for many people today, including immigrants arriving at the U.S.

Nor was it calm or bright at the time of this reading. By the time of Jesus' birth, the Romans had established a system of power in which the family of Herod the Great grew to prominence. Although half-Jews, the Herodian family was detested by the Jewish people for its oppressive rule and also because of its key role in selling out the Jewish heritage to a foreign power. One of Herod's sons, Archelaus, was so brutal in his exercise of power in Jerusalem, that Rome replaced him with one of its own governors, Pontius Pilate, who was to play a significant role in the crucifixion of Jesus. Another of the sons, Herod Antipas, was responsible for the beheading of John the Baptist. It was the same Antipas who is credited with the mocking of Jesus at his pre-crucifixion trial.

(<https://resource.acu.edu.au/gehall/XTOLOGY2.htm>)

And with this as a backdrop, Luke’s Gospel presents to us Jesus and his disciples meandering through Jerusalem’s streets, with the disciples admiring the magnificence and grandeur of the Jewish Temple. And Jesus tells his followers that there would come the day when the Temple wouldn’t even exist. “But how could this possibly be?” wondered the disciples. “Oh, you think that’s something?” Jesus replied. “That’s nothing compared to the horrible things that will be taking place around you.” And he proceeds to describe wars and insurrections, earthquakes and famine, as well as divisions within families.

The lectionary reading chosen for this first Sunday of Advent is not a passage describing silent nights filled with calmness and brightness, nor is there any heavenly peace, as we might have anticipated. Instead, it's an ominous and fearful text more suited for the season of Halloween than Christmas, with its prediction of the Temple's destruction. Because, in fact, the Temple was destroyed.

But why would the gospel writer have included this particular account? Was it to provide an example to readers of Jesus' excellent fortune-telling skills? Well, I suppose that's certainly possible. But I believe another possibility – one I think that is more likely – is because the audience to whom Luke's gospel was written were a people living in fear desperate for a word of encouragement. A people whose leader had been executed as a political criminal. A people who were being associated with the destruction of Jerusalem, and who would have been accused as being subversives and revolutionaries. A people who probably felt that, for their own good, it would be best not to draw any attention to themselves. A people who would have avoided mixing politics with their religion. A people who believed that silence was the best and safest recourse...

Yesterday was the 30th anniversary of World AIDS Day. And if there's anything that we should have learned from the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it's that silence equals death. Following the discovery of the first cases in 1981, it soon became clear a national health crisis was developing. But President Reagan's response was "halting and ineffective," according to his biographer Lou Cannon. Those infected initially with this mysterious disease -- all gay men -- found themselves targeted with an unprecedented level of mean-spirited hostility, much like the early Christians to whom the Gospel of Luke was written. And with each passing month, death and suffering increased at a frightening rate. Scientists, researchers, and health care professionals at every level expressed the need for funding, but the response of the Reagan administration was indifference and silence, refusing to even utter the word "AIDS."

It's only when people began to lift their voices in protest against the establishment that things took a change for the better. It's only when people found their voice that hope appeared on the horizon.

As frightening as this morning's passage may seem to us, it's important that we not overlook some nuggets of hope embedded within the text: "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near... [and you will know] that God's Realm is near." (v. 28, 31)

"Stand up and raise your heads." This is not a passage that encourages silence as a policy for survival. Quite the contrary, even within the midst of the violence and clamor that threatens to engulf us, it calls us to lift our voices and join with Jesus in bringing justice upon the earth.

And in the same way that the disciples were distracted by the outer trappings of the Temple, we can find ourselves distracted by the trappings of Christmas, preoccupied with Christmas parties and holiday bargains, captivated by sentimental classic holiday movies, and lulled into a dreamy silence by Christmas carols.

But now is not the time to be silent because silence equals death – spiritual death for us and physical death for many others. That's the message of Luke's gospel to the audience of its day, and it's the message to you and me.

Jesus was a threat to the Roman government because he spoke truth to power. He spoke God's truth to the Empire's power. They tried to silence him, but he refused. They even tried killing him, but that didn't work either. "Heaven and earth will pass away," he told his disciples, "but my words will not pass away." And they won't, as long as we refuse to remain silent. As long as we don't turn the channel when we hear of Roxsana and others like her. As long as we are willing to speak up and speak out for those who are standing in the margins.

This Christmas season, my hope is that we will not be lulled into such a sentimental holiday stupor that we ignore the things that are taking place all around us. And my dream is that we lift our voices in unison with Jesus, all while working toward the fulfillment of God's gospel truth of peace and justice upon the earth, goodwill to everyone everywhere. Amen.