

“My Lord What a Morning”

Happy New Year! Despite it being the first day of the Church year, I doubt anyone raised a glass last night to celebrate. Even if you were aware of today’s significance, toasting the new year of the church is not what we do. We begin the new year of the church with a season of expectation for the coming of Christ. While the secular world is focused on Christmas, on the first Sunday of Advent we are looking toward the second coming of Christ. In today’s Gospel reading Jesus points toward a new time in the coming of the Kingdom of God. As disturbing as his predictions are we might not think it would lead us to celebrate...or does it?

When I prepare to preach on a passage, I look for the Good News in it. At first reading today’s passage does not offer much good news. Jesus says, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” This is scary stuff.

Then Jesus gives us a warning “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” That is, it is not only important to keep awake, but something horrifying is going to happen if we are not able to keep our eyes open.

Yet, as I pondered today’s Gospel, something other than fear was insistently nudging me. I kept hearing a song in my head. It took me a while to identify it, because all I heard was part of the refrain, “When the stars begin to fall.” But bit by bit the African American spiritual came back to me. It is “My Lord What a Morning.”

The words of the refrain are:

“My Lord what a morning,
My Lord what a morning,
Oh, my Lord what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall.”

For the first time in my life, I connected that song with its inspiration from the Gospels. It is a slow mournful song as it is often performed, and it is so lovely. With each verse we see a progression in the life of the sinful Christian followed by that lovely refrain.

The first verse of the spiritual is:

“You’ll hear the sinner mourn,
To wake the nations underground,
Looking to my God’s right hand,
When the stars begin to fall.”

The song’s subject is a mournful sinner whose groaning is so great that he wakes the “nations underground.” We will mourn our mistakes, the hurts we have caused, and our lack of faith in God. Our regrets will be so profound and so many that we will wake the dead from their repose. We might think we are ready to meet our maker, but when push comes to shove, we know we are not. So as the spiritual says, we look to God’s right hand where Jesus sits on that fateful day.

That’s when if you are a sinner like me your praying goes into high gear. As the Spiritual says:

You'll hear the sinner pray,
To wake the nations underground,
Looking to my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall.

Sadly, we make mistakes about where to put our trust in life. A fancy car, a big house, bank accounts and investments may give some comfort, but they will not get us through the worst of times. But as St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, "God is faithful." On the day when we feel like the moon and sun have gone dark and we see stars falling all around us our money and possessions will be cold comfort compared to God's love as manifest in Jesus Christ. Thus we pray so loudly and so often that we "wake the nations underground."

Sometimes it takes a while, an awfully long while, to accept God's comfort, consolation, and compassion. But when we do it is likely that our groaning and praying will turn from sorrow into shouts of joy. As the Spiritual affirms:

"You'll hear the Christian shout,
To wake the nations underground,
Looking to my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall."

If there was even one soul that had not been awakened by our mourning and praying, our shouts of joy will bring them out of their slumber. If we were ever worried about our own ability to keep awake, every brokenhearted woman and man is going to be so full of joy on that day they will not let us slumber or sleep. The celebration will be too much for any of us to withstand.

And when we are all joined in that cloud of witnesses, those that have come before, those that are with us and those that are still to come, the shouting will turn to singing.

"You'll hear the Christian sing,
To wake the nations underground,
Looking to my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall."

This is not going to be the stodgy singing we do when we think we are being pious. Nor the singing we do at football games when we are trying to be patriotic. This is going to be the full bore, lung blistering singing we do in the car or in the shower when we think no one is listening and there is no one to criticize us. This is the kind of singing that is full of abandon and joy. The kind of singing that comes from our heart and our belly. That is the joy that God wants for us on the day the stars begin to fall. If a people enslaved can sing this song we who are free can too.

You see, this coming new day truly is a day for celebration. Not necessarily the sort of giddy, drunken celebration of New Year's Eve. The kind that leads to hangovers and sleepy, muddled heads. This is a celebration of being freed from sin, and freed for prayer, shouting, and singing the praises of God. And we sing with so much verve that we "wake the nations underground."

I shiver at the promise of that statement. For as the stars fall all around us, we are all singing so loudly and joyfully that we are waking every nation from every time and place. And when they are awakened, just like that mourning and praying sinner who turned to a shouting and singing lover of God, the nations join in that chorus of

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joy. Brothers and sisters that is going to be the New Year's party to beat all New Year's parties! We will be singing and shouting, dancing, and praising, like we had tasted the best champagne France ever made. God's love may leave us feeling drunk and out of our heads, but we won't be. It won't be our heads at all that will be so filled it will be our hearts. For on that glorious morning our hearts will be like a cup overflowing with love from and for God.

That new day that Jesus tells us about in Luke is one worth staying awake for. It is not to be feared. It is not to be dreaded. It is to be anticipated with hope. For no longer will we mourn. No longer will we be bound by our sins or worries or sadness. As John promises in Revelation 21, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...'

My Lord, what a morning!
My Lord, what a morning!
O my Lord, what a morning!
When the stars begin to fall.