

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Advent 1C, Nov 29, 2015
Luke 21:25-36**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

In 1997 on the album "Pop", the rock band U2 released the song titled "Please" where they pleaded "please, please, please... get up off your knees." I suspect the motivation behind the song had to do with years-long, intensive peace talks in Northern Ireland. It was a cause - troubles - that coloured all of U2's early music. But as good music is apt to do, the plea to "please, please, please... get up off your knees" transcends the specifics of what the lyrics may have originally meant. The song talks about grace and love, pleading... lamenting: "So love is hard; and love is tough... So love is big; Is bigger than us..." "Please, please, please... get up off your knees," live your prayers, live your faith, with courageous and compassionate action.

Almost 20 years later, on their 2009 album "No Line on the Horizon," U2 takes the plea to action up in tempo and feel in the song "Stand Up Comedy." It begins: "I got to stand up and take a step; You and I have been asleep for hours; I got to stand up; The wire is stretched in between our two towers..." The second verse ups the ante with lyrics heavily laden with irony: "Stand up, this is comedy; The DNA lottery may have left you smart; But can you stand up to beauty, dictator of the heart; I can stand up for hope, faith, love; But while I'm getting over certainty; Stop helping God across the road like a little old lady..." I'm sure they mean no disrespect to little old ladies... I wouldn't recommend messing with most of the so-called "little old ladies" I know! But the image of God as not needing our help to manage our uncertainty is a compelling one. Instead, the song... an apparent comedy, is a clarion call to stand up - for hope, faith, love, without the safety of certainty, and to stop hiding: "Out from under your beds" the chorus calls, "c'mon, ye people; stand up for your love..."

On this first Sunday of Advent, a day for hope, we also hear Jesus call us to "stand up." Our Gospel passage today concludes Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem and teaching in the temple, as told by Luke. Echoing a similar speech in Mark that we heard a couple of weeks ago, Jesus confronts the authorities of the day, answers their questions, corrects their teaching and denounces their corrupt leadership. Jesus then speaks of coming wars and persecutions along with the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Today we hear the conclusion of the speech as Jesus anticipates peoples' reaction to all the disturbing events, describes what will happen next and urges the disciples to watchfulness and vigilance.

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars," Jesus predicts, "and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." Confusion and fear... these are the primary reactions Jesus anticipates for those who see signs that profound change is coming to their world. Confusion and fear... what is going on with so much suffering and violence in the world? How are we to guard against violence from people we thought were neighbours and fellow citizens? Should we fear travelling or should we fear foreigners coming here? The United Nations Climate Change conference is meeting for the next

2 weeks in Paris, and I wonder: should we be fearful of further terrorist attacks with so many world leaders gathered? Or should we be more fearful of potential environmental disasters related to increased climate change? Or is the most fearful thing the potential economic ramifications, especially for us here in Alberta with our resource - oil - based economy? There are signs... unemployment, low price of oil, more extreme weather events, strange seasons... but what do the signs mean? And worse, what do we do? If we are going to faint from such fear and foreboding, perhaps we should just stay down and pull the covers over our heads or hide under the bed?

But that is not what Jesus implores of us as he goes on: "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory." When there is distress on earth and the powers of heaven begin to shake... the Son of Man... God Incarnate... Jesus the Risen Christ... is "coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Destruction and distress are not the end. They so often seem like the end, and our grief at the losses throughout our lives is real and difficult. Profound change comes and makes it so nothing is ever the same again. Terrible things happen and we faint from fear and foreboding. And yet, Jesus says... what looked like the end; what felt like the end; what we grieved as the end... is not the end of the story. Salvation is coming.

"Now when these things begin to take place," Jesus continues, "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." If you let your fear and foreboding at what it might all mean and what might happen next keep your head down and your body collapsed into itself... if you just pull the covers over your head and wish it would all go away... you might miss what happens next. You might miss the Incarnation of Hope. "The Son of Man is coming in a cloud with power and great glory"... but to see its coming, you can't be looking down. You have to stand up and raise your head. God IS sending our redemption, God's part is done... So "Out from under your beds," as U2 sings, "c'mon, ye people; stand up for your love..."

Standing up is not always easy. One of the transformational moments in my life came at General Synod in 1998 - yes, transformation at a church meeting... The experience was of having to stand up to vote on hotly contested motions. When a show of hands was too confusing with a room too divided, we had to stand up to be counted when we voted. Knowing that some of my fellow Diocesan delegates had different opinions than I did, I remember the fear of wondering if I would be the only one at my table of Diocesan delegates, voting one way or another on various motions. I remember the power of the physical act of standing to express a conviction, especially when leaders I knew and respected might be voting differently. Standing up is not necessarily easy, but it brings with it a broader field of vision. We can't see what's coming, what's out there, if we're hiding under our beds or hanging our heads in shame or in fear. And so U2 calls: "Out from under your beds; c'mon ye people; Stand up for your love..." Standing up means having the courage to protest what we know to be wrong and being ready to take a step, even into the unknown.

It has been said that the 2 great motivators in life are fear and love. The temptation to let fear rule is great. We see it so often on the news, in political campaigns of all stripes, and even in the church. We are told to be afraid of "this"... whatever the latest "this" might be... and therefore to do "that"... vote for this person, buy into the latest fad, consume more. Fear works for a time but it never leads to greatness. Living out of fear can make you successful, but it cannot transform the world for the better. The fear of going to hell might get bums in pews but it

will never ignite courageous and compassionate action. Fear of doing wrong might get us to perfect, or at least close enough that we can pretend, but fear will never inspire excellence that transcends perfect.

The power of grace, love and forgiveness, on the other hand, is what heals hurts, reconciles what is broken, and inspires great acts of kindness and mercy. Love energizes and humbles. At its core, the message of our faith, the story of salvation that we begin again today, is about choosing love over fear and choosing courage over comfort. The idea of standing up and raising our heads is the first step towards embracing the possibility that is love. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr is quoted as saying: “Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.”

The season of Advent we enter today offers us the opportunity to prepare for God’s coming once more. In some ways, our task is simply to wait for God’s new thing, without thinking we know what that new thing is going to be. But it is also more than that. Advent is about active, hopeful waiting that seeks to prepare heart and mind and soul, in and amongst the parties and presents, the baking and decorating. As we begin our journey together with God for another year, let us let go of certainty and stand up for God’s love. Let us stand up and raise our heads... with the hope that we will see the first signs of God’s coming, with power and great glory.