

# Sermon

by Harry Knox

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*This is the sermon by Harry Knox, preached at Asheville's First Congregational UCC on Sunday, Dec. 3, 2006. Harry is the Director of the Religion and Faith Program for the Human Rights Campaign.*

Luke 21:25-36

I am grateful to Joe for his invitation to share this time with you this morning. I often joke that I have the greatest job in the world. As Director of the Human Rights Campaign's Religion and Faith Program, I talk all the time about my two favorite subjects – religion and politics. I get to run around the country, stir people up, and leave. I have all the fun and none of the responsibilities of making community and justice happen in a local setting. It is wonderful fun!

People sometimes congratulate me on the work that we are doing at HRC, and I am proud of it, but honestly, it is brave folks like Joe Hoffmann and all of you who support him here at First Congregational Church that I admire. You have been prophetic voices for justice on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in countless ways and in a part of the country that is in crying need of such voices. I know – my mother's family is from just down the road a piece in Fannin County, Georgia. I grew up spending part of the summer at Lake Junaluska learning to love Jesus and sing the songs of Zion. I know that doing justice work on behalf of LGBT people in North Carolina is just plain tough. So I am grateful beyond measure to you and to your pastor for all that I know it has cost you to stand for equality and fairness and compassion and full inclusion. Thank you, and thanks for allowing me to be in your pulpit this morning.

You have taken a great risk in inviting me to come on this Sunday in particular. It's one thing to take a chance on a guest preacher from out-of-town on one of the Sunday's of Ordinary Time. But you are *extravagant* in your welcome! You have invited me on an Advent Sunday – have asked me to give leadership to your first thoughts of preparation for the celebration yet again of Jesus coming among us. I take the responsibility seriously and am eager to get at the Gospel text the lectionary has assigned us for the day. If you want to hear more about the fascinating interplay of religion and politics on the way to justice for LGBT folks, please come back this afternoon at 3:00 for our Faith and Fairness Town Hall. Bring your friends! Call them up while they're having roast preacher and tell them everyone, of all faiths, are welcome. We will miss something important if they aren't here. But now I hope you'll turn your attention with me to our passage from Luke's gospel.

What we hear from the lectionary this morning is actually the last section of a longer speech Jesus makes to his disciples within earshot of the crowds of people milling in and out of the Temple in Jerusalem. On this first Sunday of Advent, the text is taken from Luke's description of the lead-up to Jesus' trial and torture and execution. It seems odd at first glance, as if it would be better

heard during Lent than in Advent. It is actually quite appropriate, though, because it is here that Jesus really comes clean to the disciples about what is going to happen to Him and to them in the future. Jesus' role changes from teacher to prophet. He has a message about what is coming, what to expect, and how to live into the dramatic and challenging days that are ahead. It is appropriate for this time of preparation.

Our text for the day doesn't let us slip quickly into the gushing goo-goo of baby talk around the manger. It brings us a very adult story about what it means to follow the One we already know as Savior and Sovereign, but Who is also, always, still on the way.

The stakes are high when Jesus is involved. The One whose arrival we anticipate with joy is not a sweet, smiling so-and-so with lots of lofty ideas about how to improve your life through positive thinking. The Jesus of history and the Jesus we know to be alive and at work in this community today is a radical revolutionary whose entire design is to supplant the current power structure with one that puts the marginalized out in front, that dismisses war as an inevitability and refuses to see it as an option, that makes a priority of healing even if we think it's time for worship, that stresses community over consumption, and that says reconciliation and relationship are more important than being right.

Whew!

As a good God-fearing liberal, I have to tell you that, though I know I'm supposed to be *for* all those things, the prospect of how to get from here to there is kind of scary! When I think of what it will take in my own life to truly live simply, to heal and reconcile with others over my own racism and sexism and privilege as a rich, white, American man, to take less from the environment than what I contribute to it, to feel safe in this world without carrying a weapon...I don't know about you, but I get a sort of swimmy-headed, the sun and moon and stars get a little out of whack and there is a roaring in my ears that sounds like the crashing of waves.

Jesus said, "Honey, people will faint from fear of what is coming – because the very powers of the heavens will be shaken." Then He stole a line from Daniel – he said, "then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory."

Jesus knew the powerful effect of what He was saying. He knew that a picture like this might be exciting for the foolhardy few, but that it would give most of us pause – that we might duck our heads and wonder – "What will happen to me when all this ruckus starts?"

I talk almost every day with people who are wrestling with one of two difficult decisions: 1. to come out – to tell the true story about their lives as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person, or 2. to begin to advocate for their LGBT friends and family members at work, at church, or in the community. In almost every case, the person is motivated by the vision they see shimmering on the horizon – a world where LGBT people are embraced fully, loved without condition, and given without hesitation the rights and responsibilities everyone else gets in our society. But

when they consider the risks they must take to make it happen – loss of job – maybe customers won't come around anymore, loss of family – who needs more discord at the dinner table?, loss of safety in far too many cases – hate crimes are not a thing of the past in this country. When they think of all those things, their heads droop and their eyes hit the floor. That's what happens when we're dizzy, we put our heads down and fix our eyes on something that won't move, that won't change.

Looking at the clouds is scary business when you see someone who looks like a person standing up there.

Jesus knew the effect of what He was saying, so he looked at the disciples, who He loved so much, and said, "Now when all this starts to happen, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is on the way."

Yet again this crazy Jesus is suggesting we do exactly the opposite of what seems natural. "Don't be discouraged, I know it's going to look rough, but square your shoulders and hold your head high – your redemption is on the way."

Redemption. Why does He talk about redemption?

I think Jesus knows that at the core of all our fears is our sense of unworthiness for the tasks of the moment. What, after all, is going to happen to rich white men in this new era where the first will be last? How will someone with the power to stand on a cloud look at how I have used my little power on this earth? I've taken so few risks, made so many mistakes, loved so feebly, given so sparingly, doubted so often and believed so little. Who will I be in the new age when this glorious, powerful leader comes?

I'll tell you who I'll be – I'll be one of the redeemed. Because if the One Who is coming is like God – riding on the clouds – He is also like me, a son of man. Our Savior, the One Who is coming, is like us and *wants to* help us, and is also like God, so He *can* help us.

The High King of Heaven is this same Jesus we see healing the sick, feeding the poor, and forgiving those He loves for not having all the answers and for not always "getting it" as quickly as maybe they should have. If He is our Judge, He is also our Defender and finally, our Divine Proxy.

Will I have the courage to do what it takes to help usher in this Leader's Reign? Will I be able to make the changes in myself that will make the world more fully reflect His plan? To be the example of His Doctrine of Justice for all that will make others want to follow it?

Probably not. But at Jesus' command, I lift up my head, confident that my inadequacies will be forgiven and forgotten and that I will be empowered for service by this crazy, radical, divine Jesus.

We can be confident we will have what it takes to face the days that are coming, but now they are going to be bad days.

Earlier in His speech, the part we didn't hear, Jesus told the disciples they would be persecuted for doing the right thing.

“You will be arrested and persecuted. They will bring you before religious authorities and kings.” (Pastor Joe, I don't know which one is scarier!) “You will be betrayed by parents and siblings, relatives and friends (some of you know what that feels like); and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because you are a Christian. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

The stakes are high when you're a Christian. We read the Bible and marvel that the disciples were willing to follow a leader like Jesus when He made it crystal clear that doing so was at least going to cost them their families, friends, and livelihoods; perhaps even their very lives. The thing is, nobody ever said there was a statute of limitations on this promise from Jesus. It makes us wonder if we really want Jesus to come again this Christmas. If we follow Him, we may expect it to cost us dearly.

Friends, you have been called by God to work for justice in this community and it has already begun to cost you. I know it. But lift up your heads...lift up your heads...Jesus said when these things happen, it is a sure sign you are doing precisely the right thing. Your temporary losses are the down payment on an unimaginable mansion in Justiceland. It follows as the summer sun follows the first little green leaves of Spring.

You know, it's not the great moment that is hard. It's the little ones. We find it easy to fantasize about what we would do if we were called to make a great sacrifice – even the ultimate sacrifice – for a cause we believe in. We see young men and women doing it everyday on our behalf in Afghanistan and Iraq. No matter how we may feel about the war, we admire their great courage and hope that we would have it, if called upon.

But I want to suggest to you this morning that it's the daily-ness of our faith walk that is the real struggle. It takes nothing away from the sacrifice of those who have died for a cause to say that I admire each of you for the way you are living for the cause of justice in America in 2006. Day after day, conversation after conversation, decision after decision – some you do badly, but most you do pretty well. It is of such stuff that movements are made. It is of that cloth the Reign of God is woven. It happens stitch by stitch.

Jesus knew that His disciples – that we – would often be discouraged, not by the call to great action, but by the drudgery of the daily walk up Mount Zion. He urged us not to succumb to the temptations that offer a little distraction from the drudgery. He didn't say we didn't deserve our addictions – he knew life was tough! But He urged us not to let our desires and certainly not our

addictions get in the way of our attention to the coming Reign of God. He said when we're tempted to say, "I need a drink...or I deserve this purchase...or one kiss won't hurt," that we should look to the horizon and call on the One Who is coming for whatever it is we think the drink, the purchase, or the roll in the hay might do for us.

In that way, we won't be caught unaware by the snatches of the Reign of God being made manifest all around us – and we won't miss the ultimate day that is coming when Jesus will reign over every aspect of all the earth. So that's how it works. We work out our salvation in fear and trembling. We depend on each other when our courage fails and on God when none of us have any. And it works out.

Let us pray.

Ruler of the Universe,

We bow our heads only to you, in gratitude for the sure knowledge that we need lower them before no one else. We are grateful for the gift of Jesus in our lives. He has reconciled us to You and is reconciling us to our neighbors now. But not all our neighbors want reconciliation. You know some of them are fighting us as hard as they know how.

God of love, give us alert minds to look for means of service that lead to peace. Give us kind, open hearts that invite others to know the wonderful gift of relationship with you that we so treasure. Keep us strong for the struggle against hatred and misunderstanding. And release us from all the things that get in the way of our service to you. We don't know how you'll do it, but we trust that if you tell us something is in the way, you will replace it, somehow, with joy.

We love you so much. Even so, Lord, quickly come.

Amen.