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November 29th, 2014
Sermon for Ordination

Before we begin today, I'd like to try something. Normally, I spend my Sunday mornings working with kids and one of the things we like to do is call-and-response or act-and-react. I'd like to try that today. When I raise my arms out to you, that is your signal to say "something's coming." Let's try that now. (*tries this a few times to make sure the congregation understands*). Wonderful. Let us pray.

...Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, our rock and our redeemer.

I have a confession to make. Ever since I was fifteen years old, I have dreamt of standing up here. I remember being in confirmation class and coming down to the sanctuary to learn about worship and being told "say something, give a sermon." "Um...God is good!?" Prolific words from a shy fifteen year old. I have tons of memories of this church, but when I first read this week's passage, I thought of something completely different. Around the same time I was in confirmation class, I was spending my evenings, once my homework was finished, listening to the musical I had fallen in love with: West Side Story. For HOURS, I would sit at the computer and play the soundtrack. Late at night, once my parents were (hopefully) asleep, I would sing along to my favorite song in the show, which you just heard, called "Something's Coming." Although I knew I'd never get to play Tony or sing that song for anyone besides my pillows, the words filled me with such joy, such excitement...such hope.

For those of you who didn't spend your adolescence listening to musicals from the 1950s, West Side Story is a reimagining of the play Romeo and Juliet, set in the Upper West Side of New York City. Rather than the Montagues and the Capulets, the main conflict was between the Jets, a Caucasian street gang, and their Puerto Rican rivals, the Sharks. Stuck in the middle of this is Tony, a Polish American former thug turned clean. Somehow, and it's never made clear how, Tony gets it in his mind that, although the world around him is rough to say the least, something great is coming. He doesn't know when, he doesn't know how, but it's coming and he's ready for it. What Tony doesn't know is that his song, his words, his feeling, they aren't anything new. What he's describing, what he's waiting for, is something we have been waiting for for a long time, something we are waiting for right now. How do we know? Because Jesus tells us so.

Now, while Jesus may be the subject of many musicals, He did not ever write one that anyone knows of. Still, when hearing Tony's song, it's hard not to also hear Jesus' words from Mark floating along those melodies. Through Tony, we learn how to act when Jesus tells us that **something's coming**.

Our Bible passage begins with an amazing proclamation: the sun will be darkened, the moon will all but disappear, and the stars will fall from the sky. If that sounds terrifying, that's only because it is. It's also something that, you may notice, we as humans have no control over. The passage before this one describes persecution, people turning against each other, hatred controlling everything. It is a description of fear and war and despair that would send shivers down your spine if it didn't sound so much like the world we live in today. What's worse is that this is what humanity is doing to itself. People are turning against each other, people are causing wars, people are hurting each other. This was Tony's world, too. Poverty, violence, rivalry,

that's what surrounded him every day. People hurting each other. It's also what surrounded the first-century Christ followers who first read this text as Rome took control of Jerusalem and destroyed the beloved temple. The temple was the Jewish temple but the first-century followers, still closely identifying with Judaism, felt the sting of this decimation as well. For them, for Tony, for us, it was and sadly still is a world of people hurting people.

Yet, when we hear today's text, we are told that there's something beyond the hurt. There's something "after that suffering", something we have no control over. Tony describes it as "cannonballing down from the sky," we may describe it as frightening, but it is also amazing, something no human can do. This is not something that's part of our world or Tony's or even the early Christ followers; this is not people hurting people. This is a sign that God has something else in store. What comes after that is even more amazing: the Son of Man coming down in clouds to usher in a new world. When Jesus uses the phrase "Son of Man" in this way, He unites the human with the divine. When he says these words, he brings God to the people. He let's them know that **something's coming**.

The next part of the passage changes directions. Jesus tells the disciples a parable about a fig tree. He tells us to look to nature to learn what's coming. Tony has a similar idea. When he sings about the great thing that will happen, where are some of the places he thinks it will come from? Down the block, on the beach, under a tree. He's looking to nature, to the world around him, to reveal this beautiful mystery to him. Jesus tells us to do the same thing. Well, not *exactly* the same thing; the trees we find in New York or even Pittsburgh are certainly not the same as the fig trees of the Middle East. You see, the fig tree is unlike any other tree here, even unlike other trees in Jerusalem. It's growth patterns were so predictable that, once the ancient farmers saw leaves sprouting on their branches, they knew exactly how many days there were

until the summer season, which would bring about the harvest. Those leaves aren't just a sign of growth; they're a sign that something's about to happen, a change is coming. The cold winter will make way for a beautiful summer.

All of this makes sense considering that this text comes at the end a part of Mark that's nicknamed "the little apocalypse." Apocalyptic stories in the Bible are often written for communities in distress. This describes first-century Jerusalem on the brink of decimation. This describes the mean streets of 1950s New York gang territory. This describes Florida, and Ohio, and Missouri, and our community and communities all over America today. These are people in need of good news, in need of something to look forward to. They-WE-need a change in season. Tony says there's a miracle due. Jesus tells us that, just like the figs on the trees, things will change because **something's coming**.

The thing is, whatever that "something" is that's coming, it isn't here yet. If you know the end of Romeo and Juliet, you know the end of West Side Story. For although he sings about possibility, things do not run smoothly for our friend. Tony dies. Tony kills. Tony is a part of a system much larger than himself. He is part of a world that strips everything away from a person until they can be judged by the simplest and most superficial means. That person is not from where we're from; I don't think they're a person like us. That person doesn't act in a way that we understand; that person must be uncivilized or savage. That person's skin isn't the same as ours; it doesn't matter if that person lives or dies. This is the world Tony lives in. This is the world those first-century Christ followers lived in. This is the world that we live in. It's even the world that Jesus lived in. The systems that are killing our friends and children and even some of us now, the systems that killed Tony and taught him to kill, those are the same systems that caused people to cry for Jesus to be executed, for him to be nailed to a cross and left to die in

humiliation. We have been looking for a better day since Jesus told us it was coming and it's still not here and that is maddening. The thing is, Jesus doesn't tell us to look for that day. In fact, He says the opposite. No one knows when that time will come except God the Creator. Not the angels, not even Jesus knows. If Jesus doesn't know, how can we? No, Jesus gives us another set of instructions: keep alert. Keep awake. He tells us that **something's coming**, but we can't just sit trying to guess that date. We have to do something. We have to wait.

As a teenager, reading the Bible, listening to Tony's words, I was waiting for something big to happen. As we look forward this Advent season, as we sit here together today, what is it that we're waiting for? Is it the birth of a small child, weak yet miraculous, born in the most extraordinary of circumstances, as a Savior to us? Of course, but as this passage reminds us, that's not the *only* thing we're waiting for. When we light our Advent wreath, when we sing our Christmas carols, when we pray for the coming of the Christ child, we not only remember the birth of Jesus, but the life of Jesus, and what's to come as well. We look toward that second coming that cannot happen without that silent night. We look towards a world in which things will be different, in which peace will fill our hearts and our lungs and our minds until it is all that we are made of, in which justice will be the universal language spoken in every land, in which the hope of new life is so powerful it can make the sun fall from the sky. THAT DAY is what we are waiting for. And when I say "wait," I do not mean sit idly by until we see the signs. This Scripture tells us to "keep awake!", to "keep alert!", to not be found asleep when the master returns home. When that phone jingles or that door knocks, we have to be ready to answer. When the moon falls, we have to be ready to catch it. To keep awake isn't to wait as the world passes by, its to change the world and prepare it for the hope to come. What does that look like? It looks like a world in which we work to protect and love our families and neighbors so that

there are no more Mike Browns or Tamir Rices or Trayvon Martins or Renisha McBrides. It looks like a world in which we say “no more” to the senseless aggression and police brutality and racism that is hurting us all. It looks like standing up for ourselves and proudly declaring that hurt will not be the final word because Jesus tells us that love is the final word.

When we do these things, we prepare for day when Peace will have both a Prince and a place to reside. We will fill the world with so much good, so much love, so much hope that Tony’s words will be true: the air will be humming because something great is coming. Amen.