

“*Heads Up!*”

By Pam Driesell

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 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.”

Luke 21:25-28

Our scripture passage from Luke always reminds me of Little League Baseball Games.

Let me explain. When my kids started playing little league, I had a lot to learn. One of the things that took me by surprise was the frequency of foul balls. Those awkwardly clipped balls that would soar high above us, escaping the confines of the field and threatening the safety of all the spectators. Those who were paying attention would yell the standard warning to alert those who were not paying attention: HEADS UP! HEADS UP!

Yet, I noticed a curious thing happened when someone yelled HEADS UP: most people immediately put their heads down, covering at least a part of their vulnerable skulls with their hands. These people ducked in fear, hoping against hope the potentially harmful blow wouldn’t come their way!

So I followed suit and always ducked when a foul ball came my way. That is until the summer I read *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving. In the opening chapter Owen Meany clips a high foul ball and it hits his friend’s mother in the head and she tragically dies. So I decided I needed to keep my head up! That’s when I no-

ticed that the people who kept their heads up were paying close attention, following the long arc of those foul balls. They were confident that if they watched the ball, they could catch it or safely move out of its way.

That's why they yell HEADS UP! So people can see what's coming. The people who duck their heads are not confident that they can handle what's coming. So in fear and insecurity, they look down!

The reason this story comes to mind when I read this passage from Luke is because when Jesus tells his disciples "raise your heads" it is essentially a HEADS UP! shout resounding across the millennia to us: imploring us in the midst of the distress and chaos of our generation, do not look down, do not duck!

Our passage today is known as a Little Apocalypse. Apocalyptic literature addresses people who are experiencing earth-shattering events, times of loss and tragedy, confusion and disorientation.

Luke is indeed writing to a generation who has seen the destruction of the world as they knew it in a sense: the Temple was destroyed, political powers had tumbled, a military occupation made everyday life tense, the Roman Empire was upside down, the economy was falling apart and nothing felt stable! Apocalyptic literature is written to people who are suffering, afraid, confused, and longing for a new world to break through.

Scholars like to argue about whether Jesus was talking here about the end of all time as we know it, or was he referring to the destruction of the Temple, which by the time Luke is written has already happened. For today, let's put all that speculation aside. What I find more interesting is the fact that every generation faces its own endings and new beginnings—as do all of us in our own lives. So rather than wonder about some "future return of Jesus on the clouds" as a literal scene that might be depicted in a movie, let's ponder how these verses might speak to us about Jesus constantly coming in a cloud—clouds in the Bible are symbols of the divine presence in the midst of suffering, sorrow, and confusion.

There is no doubt that people who live in war-torn countries and occupied territories—in places where food is rationed and one worries daily about impending explosions—"get" these passages in a way that we simply cannot. Still some of us in here today are deeply worried about the condition of our world and fearful for the political, financial, ecological, and moral stability of the world as we know it. I wonder if any of you can relate to that?

Some of us may feel like we are in the midst of a personal apocalypse, confounded by sorrow and loss: perhaps our family as we know it is coming apart; perhaps our lifestyle as we have known it is coming to an end; perhaps mental illness or addiction or our own mistakes or the failures of those we counted on have caused our world to feel tumultuous and unstable; perhaps we have lost a job or failed out of school or someone we relied on to keep us secure is going away or has died.

Apocalyptic literature speaks to us when we are afraid and our security is threatened—when a foul ball is coming right at us—whether that fear is generated by events on a macro level or on a micro level. I wonder how many of us, in one way or another, are longing for something new to break into our worlds, calm our fears, and give us a sense of security in the midst of suffering and confusion, globally or personally?

Luke 21 exhorts us in such times to guard against letting our hearts get weighed down:

in dissipation—squandering our energy,

in drunkenness—numbing our fears,

in the worries of this life—narrowly and anxiously focusing on ourselves. In other words, we have a tendency to duck. Like the people at the ballpark who look down in fear when they hear a fly ball is on the loose, some of us may be tempted to do the same when we know that threatening things are happening all around us.

How about you? When you hear about or experience things in the world that are frightening, do you look away, take cover? When you hear about or experience things in your own personal life that will disrupt the status quo, do you look down? Does your heart get weighed down and your field of vision narrow? Do you focus on what makes you feel secure and safe, like putting your head in your lap and your hands over your head, even if it is a false security? Do you tell yourself to focus on the positive and divert your attention from the things that are disturbing or confusing ... ignore the news ... avoid bringing up the painful issues that are dividing us ... don't think about all that's wrong.

That is exactly what the passage encourages us NOT TO DO in times of distress and disorientation. Jesus insists that the hard, scary, out of control, desperate situations we face are like leaves on the trees in spring that tell us summer is coming, they tell us that our redemption, our healing, is near. You see, if we keep our heads down in order to avoid facing the reality of our world and our lives, we will also miss the ways that Christ is coming into the world and our lives.

But it is hard to resist the impulse to DUCK ... to keep our heads down! Have you ever invited people to pray with eyes open and heads up? I have and what I have found is that we all, myself included, have a strong impulse to put our heads down. Of course, we are seeking to be reverent, meditative, and focused. And, of course, there is a time for all that. But perhaps it is also a telling metaphor for how we unconsciously think about the life of faith as a shutting out of the world. Sometimes sentiments like: *"I don't come to church to hear about what's wrong with the world."* And *"I just have to 'have faith'"* are simply code for code *"I'd rather just keep my head down, thank you!"*

But wait, you might be thinking, what about being positive? What about focusing on the good? What about, for example, Paul's admonition to the Philippians to think about "whatever is honorable, whatever is pleasing..."? There is a time for that

and it does not mean we avoid keeping our eyes on the fly balls in our world and in our lives. Perhaps the life of faith calls us to do both.

Years ago, I learned an interesting concept from an architect friend of mine. It is the first step of Architectural Programming called Problem Seeking, and it is vital to the success of an architectural design. It's the HEADS UP! phase of designing a functional building and perhaps it is a vital part of designing a functional faith too. I think about it when I see a parent dealing with a wailing child. They do not put their heads down and cover their ears. They are attentive Problem Seekers, trying to discover why their child is so unhappy.

When we keep our heads up, when we stay alert we can be problem seekers, too, and in gaining clarity about what's wrong comes clarity about what might make it right. When we raise our heads and watch the errant balls carefully, we also see where the redemption is, where Christ is coming to us in the clouds of confusion and sorrow.

When we keep our heads up, we get curious about what the "signs" are telling us ...

- What is the political acrimony really all about?
- What's underneath the tension at the dinner table?
- What are the slipping grades telling us?
- What are the declining numbers in church membership inviting us to examine about ourselves?

Rather than avoiding the signs of distress, we follow them; like watching the path of the wayward ball so we can see where it is headed and determine how to position ourselves if not to catch it, at least to avoid its impact. The truth is that the world as we know it will cease to be over and over again: political powers will come and go, communities, schools, families, the church, will all go through times of turmoil.

This passage reminds us that as disciples we are called to keep our HEADS UP! We are called to be Problem Seekers who are confident that getting clear about the problem with raised heads and eyes wide open will also bring into clearer focus the One who always comes in the cloud of suffering or sorrow bringing redemption amidst the pain and confusion. What would that look like in your life right now? In our corporate life as a congregation?

Like those who have confidence in their ability to deal with fly balls, we can have confidence that the One who surprised us by coming into the world that first Christmas not in domination but in vulnerability, is coming into the world still—to us and through us—bringing our redemption in surprising ways. We do not have to duck in fear and insecurity.

HEADS UP everyone! Christ is coming!