Happy New Year! It is, after all, the beginning of a new liturgical year. Last year, well, last Sunday, we acknowledged that Christ has become King of the Universe. And, now, we begin again the annual journey that will lead to next November’s celebration of that same feast. The beginning of the liturgical year is marked, too, by a shift to the reading of another of the Gospels; this year we’ll be reading through Luke, the biblical source of the “Magnificat” as well as the reading we just heard. So, it is a time of beginnings, again. That “Happy New Year” said, the news around us is a bit unsettling . . . as it has been for some time.

Let’s begin in ancient Israel. A close reading of our psalm suggests that it was NOT written at a time when David was feeling at the top of his game. Indeed, the psalm begins, “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you; let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me . . . let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes” (25.1-2). “Treacherous enemies” pursued David numerous times and, when he was hiding out, hearing of their approach would have been unsettling, to say the least. Yet, he “lifted up his soul”, “put his trust in God”, and ultimately, was able to establish a kingdom.

A kingdom that lasted about 450 years (although not without internal strife and division). But, in the first third of the 6th century BCE, the news that reached Jerusalem — and the prophet Jeremiah — was VERY troubling indeed. While Jerusalem had been fortified and re-fortified several times, in the early years of the 6th century the Babylonians, who extracted tribute from Jerusalem a century earlier, came back with a vengeance when David’s descendent, Judah’s king Zedekiah, rebelled against Babylon’s Nebuchadrezzar — despite the advice of Jeremiah. In 598, the Babylonians plundered the city, and eleven years later leveled it entirely, carrying its leaders off into exile. Jeremiah, and some others, fled to Egypt.

Egypt comes back onto the scene almost 600 years later, when the news that Mary and Joseph received in Nazareth was more than a bit unsettling. To learn, as a teenage girl, that you were pregnant; to learn that your betrothed was pregnant — and that neither of them had anything to do with it . . . how difficult that was to bear! Joseph wondered whether or not he should break off the relationship, until an angel told him to stick it out. Mary felt the need to leave town, even though she had received a message from God letting her know that this was no mistake. Unsettling news, indeed! Yet, they both listened to the divine message, the boy was born. News that Herod was then killing male children caused the family to flee to Egypt.

After Mary and Joseph’s son had been crucified and raised, the news coming to the apostle Paul from the citizens of Christ’s kingdom in Thessalonica was not encouraging. According to the book of Acts, Paul and his companions experienced significant opposition in that city — primarily from the Jewish community, jealous of Paul’s preaching — opposition that
incited a riot! And Paul and his companions were sent away. But the apostle’s departure didn’t dissolve the opposition, and Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians, a community feeling very discouraged and hopeless.

While Paul was dealing with the matters in Macedonia, the news in Palestine wasn’t good either. Part of Paul’s work in Asia Minor was to raise money for those beset by famine in Judah. On top of that, tensions were rising in Jerusalem as King Herod tried to extend the city’s fortifications, prompting Rome to stop the project lest the city become more difficult to control should a rebellion arise. And a rebellion DID begin in 66 CE, resulting in Rome’s destruction of the city four years later. Our reading from Luke’s Gospel has those hardships in its rear-view mirror.

And then we come to today’s news, whether on television, in print, via on-line sources or personal experience. The papers this past week told of the Alaskan earthquake and potential tsunami. We’ve heard about lies at the highest levels of our government. A very disturbing report about climate change was issued by the administration, and then was dismissed by many with the power to respond. The ongoing story of “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” in Central America bounced back and forth between the front page to the back page to the front page over the last few weeks, as the “caravan” drew nearer to our border, prompting a violent response. Tensions between the Ukraine and Russia, and a Saudi assassination of a Turkish journalist made their way to OUR attention. And among us, always, are those who’ve received difficult-to-hear diagnoses, experienced unexpected changes in employment status, or suffered ruptured relationships.

Addressing such situations — whether ancient or contemporary, Jesus acknowledges that: “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. . . . When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk 21.25-26, 28). “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Jesus told his audience that, despite the looming destruction of Jerusalem — despite the destruction of their center, the place of their religion’s solidity — their redemption, their liberation, was near at hand. In their time — in our time — of despair, Jesus’ counsel is to hope.

Jesus was not, is not, pollyanna-ish about this. He was very aware what our responses to such difficulties might be: “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life” (21.34). He recognizes here that our natural response is generally to run away, to avoid the realities, perhaps to become numbed — either through inattention or chemicals — by all the news. Numbed to the point that we will lose even a smidgen of hope, a smidgen that might enable us to act. This is what the last verse we heard this morning suggests: “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place” (21.36). By “all these things”, I understand Jesus to refer not only to horrors and tragedies, but also to the temptations to withdraw, perhaps to fall into the trap of complacency: “Oh well, another school shooting; nothing we can do.”

The scripture readings we have heard this morning, however, are NOT about hopelessness; they are NOT about withdrawal; they are NOT about despair; they are NOT
about complacency. They are all about hope, but not just a passive hope, or even a fervent wish. They are about hope that demands something of us; we are partners with God in creating a hopeful future. And THAT hope can encourage us. That encouragement, too, has a long history.

While David was facing “wantonly treacherous enemies”, he still proclaimed his trust in God, and recognized that God would lead the humble in doing what’s right. The message that Jeremiah proclaimed to the former inhabitants of Jerusalem wanting to return from exile was hope: a Branch from David’s house would arise and lead the people into a new city where justice and righteousness would be at the core of its being. The unsettling news of Mary’s pregnancy was tempered by the hope that she would be bearing God’s great gift to the world. This inspired the “Magnificat”, a hopeful song celebrating the overturning of the injustices in the world. Paul’s counsel to the beleaguered in Thessalonica was to increase their love for each other, and for everyone else! Action was called for! These are no head-in-the-sand responses to “wars and insurrections” or to “great earthquakes and famines or plagues” or to “betrayals by parents or friends” (Lk 21.9, 11, 16)! They are denials of the powers of darkness. They are exhortations to stand fast, in faith, and to act on that faith.

So, the new year is upon us. This new year, like Advent, beginning in darkness, is an opportunity — a charge — for us to do more than simply await the light of Christ. We are bid, in the words of the “Magnificat” to “scatter the proud in their conceit”, to “lift up the lowly”, to “fill the hungry with good things”. It is upon us to address the plight of migrants seeking a new life. We, who have been charged to be stewards of this amazing creation—especially here in Colorado, we need to act on our hope in the Creator to ensure that our children’s children will be blessed by the same beauty. When encountering others experiencing deep pain and sorrow, we are called upon to be the understanding ear, the comforting shoulder. We can’t back away from the darkness; Advent summons us to enter in to it, and through faith in the Light whose birth we await, to work to redeem, to dispel, it.

The news may be unsettling. But we are not to be unsettled. Jesus tells us: “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Amen.