



November 29, 2020 - Advent Apocalypse

Given by Rev. Mattei

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Advent begins on the Sunday following Thanksgiving. With the first Sunday of Advent we begin a new Church year. It is the season preparing us for Christmas day. We pull out the garland, we deck the walls, we plan Christmas gifts and meals. We start getting cards in the mail. There is electricity in the air, expectations, and enthusiasm.

The Advent wreath is the traditional centerpiece of the Christmas season. It symbolizes the passage of the four weeks of Advent in the liturgical calendar of the Western Church. The Wreath includes four candles. Every Sunday we light one candle until all four are lit. The first candle symbolizes **hope**, the second **peace**, the third **joy**, and the fourth **love**. The bright light from the candles is an expression of the growing anticipation of the birth of Jesus Christ, whom the Bible calls the Light of the World. The circular shape of the wreath represents God's eternity and symbolizes God's unifying embrace of all creation.

The secular world has historically been very intentional at commercializing the season and selling the lie that this product or that or the other is going to give both the giver and the receiver unmeasurable joy. The promise of happiness is wrapped in shiny foil and bright lights. Santa Claus is claimed the saving hero of the season.

Besides inciting people to buy what promises happiness, our Western society works hard at putting on hold the demands of life and distracting us from the crisis of the world.

Our attention is called to happier thoughts of family gatherings, plenty of food, comfort, laughter, and warmth.

But not all is as joyous as we in middle- and upper-class America might expect. Something is suddenly strident as we listen to the Scripture passages assigned for the season. At the heart of Advent is a deep wound: God's groaning, limping creation still waits for its Healer to appear in glory and bring into reality what Christians know through faith. St. Paul tells us, we "wait for the *revealing* [in Greek, *apokalupsin*] of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7). Advent is a time when we wait for the *apocalypse*.

The prophet Isaiah also highlights two unappealing faith issues. The first is God's distance. God is "up there" in the heavens, aloof, distant, and unavailable to save. "Tear open the heavens and come down," he shouts. Isaiah's second source of anxiety is his recollection of God's past awesome deeds in favor of Israel. God shook the mountains and caused Israel's enemies to tremble.¹ This memory is actually a source of pain and anguish. God's benevolent actions in the

¹ Think of the Exodus or God's deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701.



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past stand in stark contrast to God's evident lack of action in the present. How come God isn't doing anything to correct our troubling reality?

Psalm 80 has a similar spirit. It almost sounds like a challenge to God: give ear, listen, do something! The One on whom the psalmist calls is assumed to be just, faithful, and loyal. But God remains silent, absent, and hidden. Salvation is a hope and not a reality just yet. One is challenged to walk blindly and confidently in faith. And yet, that confidence at times falters. At times, we are left breathless, terrorized.

The remarkable events of 2020 demonstrate with stinging clarity our deep need to be rescued from the suffocating tentacles of sin. This year's events draw attention to the profound contradiction between God's promises and the brutal realities of life on earth. Human beings are busy destroying one another and creation. That is a stark reality but, in a way, we could almost ignore the far away wars and dismiss the depletion of the environment. The pandemic has brought the devastation of sickness and death much closer to home. The virus has not stopped before class or race privilege: it has affected millions of us regardless of class and color. But it certainly has invaded the life of the underprivileged in a more dramatic way.

Even in normal times, we should consider and concede this: If we were part of the underclass; if we were the ones consistently traumatized, disadvantaged, displaced, discriminated against, and disposed of; if our children were the ones growing up without a viable future in a world shredded by violence and engulfed in systemic inequality; if our grandchildren and great-grandchildren were the ones inheriting a world where they would be gasping for clean air and competing for fresh water; then we would be the ones saying "Enough already." And if we were lacking the educational, economic, and political resources to motivate and induce any permanent change we would ultimately be looking for God to intervene.

For those who live a comfortable life now, apocalyptic language reveals a future menace. Such a language is despicable and incomprehensible. How can one entertain happy thoughts with that language? Why, we are past the thoughts of a vengeful God, we don't want to hear of the Day of Wrath. We say we live in the time of the love of Jesus as reported in the New Testament and not anymore under the critical eye of the angry God of the Old Testament.

We are comfortable with the idea that when the Lord returns, we are going to have peace, love, and joy. That will happen for sure if God is to be believed. But we cannot skip over the time of reckoning and purification. We must hear and believe even the harsh words of Jesus who speak on behalf of the poor. We cannot ignore the fact that we are part of a global economic system



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that while benefiting millions has also caused the suffering of millions of other people. For those struggling now, apocalyptic language reminds them of the promise of redemption and vindication.²

In all of the world affairs, what seems to be unbearable is that God continues to be absent and permit violence and tragedies to happen. No wonder it is the helpless and the defeated of the world who feel comfortable with apocalyptic language. If we are to trust God when God says, "Vengeance is mine."³ then the poor and the afflicted are going to welcome the Day of the Lord and Jesus' Second Coming as a time of reckoning and justice.

Advent invites us to linger on these matters, perhaps coming to the Christians as a spoiler of the joy of the season. What is more precious than the birth of the Savior? Aren't we entitled to rejoice? Of course, we are. Of course, we can and need to remind one another of the promises in store for us. However, Advent invites us to linger on these matters, not only on the expectation of Christ's second advent but also on the disappointing fact that it hasn't happened yet. Why must peace tarry so long? How do we sit in faith before a brutal and unbearable reality? How can the Church and the message of the gospel be truly relevant to those who suffer? How much longer must creation "groan" in expectation of God's glory (Romans 8:22-23)?

Advent takes these hard questions seriously. It defies any attempt to explain them away through trite answers and instead opens up liturgical space where they can exist in painful dialogical tension with Christ's lavish promises. Christians need to be part to that conversation. We can be the vehicle of those promises. Let us be allies and advocates of those who are on their knees in life; let us use our resources, energy and affluence to make a change in the world. Organizations such as Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and ELCA Good Gifts can be of assistance to alleviate social wrongs.

Let us pray: Eternal God, You are the Alpha and the Omega. Remind us that you are always with us, you have always been with us and will always be. Amen.

² See R. Rohr, Merton's Call for Racial Justice, Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations, Friday, November 27, 2020.

³ Deuteronomy 32:35