

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Advent 1 Year B
December 3, 2023

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

No one expects the world to end. Especially not when the Christmas lights are already up.

The first Sunday of Advent feels like an incongruent gotcha moment in the Church—we begin setting up our Christmas decorations, we look ahead to our plans for Carols and Pageants, and then we invite you all to join us for a jolly and merry account of the end of the world.

No baby Jesus in sight. No domestic bliss of the holy family. No angels to surround and coo from above. Just Jesus' longest speech in the Gospel of Mark, instigated by the disciples gesturing to the Temple from the Mount of Olives, and murmuring to themselves, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" And Jesus replying to them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

The doesn't stop there—false messiahs will appear, the holy and high places will be profaned, earthquakes and wars will erupt, and betrayals between one another will become the norm. The sun will be darkened, the moon will cease to shine, and a keen ear might sense that, given the current news cycles, that we are already living in the end times.

Perhaps we are.

Apocalyptic literature is in essence upending, rending norms and mores, presenting a future so inverted that its point is made merely by naming what would undo the readers most poignantly. The end of the world is not a means to an end, but isolates—uncomfortably—all the frameworks and structures we have come to rely on, and to render them fallible at best, obsolete at worst. Apocalypticism reminds us that we are, at best, transitory beings, that the lives and status we spend our waking, and often sleeping, hours creating, curating and maintaining, will not last. The chasm which keeps us at a safe distance between the 'here' and the 'there'—the sacred and the profane—the presence of divinity and its absence—that is all deflated when the thin curtain is torn apart, as it is in the Gospel of Mark, as it will be when Jesus arrives for the first and second times.

Fun stuff, right?

Maybe not fun. Not merry. Not even joyful.

Jesus doesn't come the first, or even the second time, to bring us gifts and comfort. That's Santa or whichever elf on a shelf is your cup of tea this time of the year.

Jesus' imminent and yet future arrival is wholly about unvarnished honesty. For it is only when we are honest and truthful about the reality in which we live, can we begin to invite in a God who doesn't only inhabit the beautiful building we stand in awe of, but the rubble it will inevitably become.

Apocalyptic texts tend to make readers nervous, unless those readers are already at the margins themselves and have nothing left to lose. In many ways, eschatological—end of the world focused—literature can be liberating and liberative. No one who benefits from set structures, be they obviously oppressive or not, is going to complain about them, or imagine a world where they do not exist or hold sway. But remove that power—that participation—that identity with 'what works for me, now'—and suddenly the world seems replaceable, expendable.

The destructive nature of the apocalypse is only fearsome if you have something to lose, if you have power and agency and wish to retain it. But name that power, name that agency, and one invites a new layer of freedom and potential. That which would cause us fear through threat of destruction, might actually become the modus operandi for a God who eschews those very privileges.

The Advent season isn't simply the anticipation of the baby Jesus in the manger—as wild a diminishment of an omnipotent God as we could imagine. It is also the vision of the second coming of Christ, always foretold, and never fully considered, as it's always far more convenient to think of the second coming as something that happens far off in the future, so far away that we don't actually have to confront it or imagine it. Jesus coming in the clouds and in glory to judge the living and the dead will clearly only happen to another generation, you know, a generation who probably deserves it. Perhaps we secretly hope that we'll be fully moved into the pearly gate condos and looking good in some angel wings by the time that happens, and it won't be on us.

We don't want the ending. We're happier with the sentimental beginnings.

But endings happen all the time.

It may not be the crumbling of a building, but it might be the crumbling of the thing we had relied on; the thing we had worshipped; the thing upon which we had placed our plans for the future, our plans for the present, our plans so carefully thought out. The disciples say to Jesus, look at what is immovable and eternal. And Jesus replies, nothing is eternal except God. A God who will come and inhabit and sanctify that which is temporary and transitory. A God who will hallow the endings, making that which was destroyed, redeemed. A God who does not eschew grief in pursuit of a promise of painlessness, but one who blesses that which lies at the core of our very hearts.

And there is our Advent welcome and invitation: in the midst of apocalypse are we willing to wait and watch for a God who comes into the rubble? Or would we rather cover up the ravages of all the endings with tinsel, heartaches, and injuries with tinsel, and pretend they aren't there?

Jan Richardson, an author and artist, shared a creative ministry with her husband Gary, which they called 'The Advent Door'. She would write and paint, and he would write and create music, and together they would invite others into the fulness of the Advent season.

In 2013, Gary died unexpectedly on the second day of Advent¹. A year later, Jan wrote the following blessing on the anniversary of his death, resurrecting her Advent Door offerings for the first time, and this is the blessing she wrote:

Blessing When the World is Ending

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun,
the knife,
the fist.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the slammed door,
the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone,

¹ <https://adventdoor.com/2014/11/23/advent-1-blessing-when-the-world-is-ending/>

the television,
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.

It has not come
to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,

gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

The stones will tumble down, friends. No matter how beautiful they are, or how immovable they seem. The sun will be darkened, the lives we lead will change, and we will think that the end of it all has come. But Jesus, on the Mount of Olives, the place of his own betrayal, will look at us with love and remind us that God is eternal. And that God is sitting right there, with us on that hillside of death and endings, promising it will lead to another beginning.

Do we believe him this year?

Amen.