

Advent 1

December 1, 2024

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

You may have heard me mention, a time or two, that my family is Swedish?

What you may not know is that Swedes and Norwegians pick on each other mercilessly and are the butt of each others' jokes – usually jokes about how dim the other folks are

When my family was visiting Epcot Center in Disney World when I was a teenager, we ate at the restaurant at the Norwegian pavilion – when the wait staff found out that our family had Swedish heritage and the family at the table next to us were actually *from* Sweden, they came over to the table – one by one – to tell jokes, all at the expense of Swedes of course

We had a few to throw back at them, and this is one the family next to us told:

Why do Norwegians go outside during a thunder and lightning storm?

Because they think they're getting their picture taken.

Why this joke came to my mind when preparing for this sermon this morning might be more of a glimpse into the wonders of my brain than anything else you've heard me preach

It was the apocalyptic imagery from this morning's gospel

“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.”

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

And in my head I pictured all those Norwegians running out in a thunder and lightning storm thinking they're getting their picture taken

The connection I was making with that joke, is partly related to our capacity to understand, or misunderstand as the case may be, the signs and signals we're getting from the world around us

And also some of the big fears and misconceptions we have about the “end times” – the apocalypse – and, perhaps, why I feel the need to make light of it

Some Christian traditions have latched onto this idea that the apocalypse *will* happen in our lifetime – I personally have survived 56 end time predictions (according to the list on Wikipedia<sup>1</sup>)

Some Christian traditions use the image, or threat, of the end times as a significant motivator for conversion to Christianity and adherence to strict teachings within the tradition

The “Left Behind” series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B Jenkins in the mid-1990's through early 2000's is an example of how the apocalypse has been used as a tool for Evangelical teaching and coercion (and here I mean the mostly-American movement of the Christian tradition)

By the way, *many* of those “end time” predictions that you and I have survived were made around the turn of the millennium - that conversion of Christian prophecy and the natural times and wonders of the world

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_dates\\_predicted\\_for\\_apocalyptic\\_events#20th\\_century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events#20th_century)

The idea of an apocalypse both terrifies and energizes Christians of all denominations, and with texts like this morning's from Luke, it is no wonder we all struggle to make sense of what our teacher meant

And, it wasn't until I was in seminary that I learned/realized that the season of Advent is as much about the anticipation of the second coming of Christ as it is about the coming of Christ as the baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

The first Sunday in Advent typically has this second coming advent in mind and the readings for this Sunday have this theme to them, and my discomfort in preaching about them means I tell you odd jokes about Norwegians in thunderstorms

So what shall we make of this text from Luke and Jesus' comments?

Troy Troftgruben, Associate Professor of New Testament at Wartburg Theological Seminary writes that "Eschatological (end-time thinking) discourse is a polarizing thing. On the one hand, Christians have used texts like this to make specific end-time predictions based on spurious connections to today—none of which have (so far) proven true. On the other hand, in reaction to these predictions and the challenges of eschatological imagery, others have practically rejected all promises of end-time events, deeming them a product of ancient mythological thinking."<sup>2</sup>

Put me in that latter category – if I have been flippant about the way some of our Christian siblings have interpreted these texts it is because my head has a hard time wrapping around these ideas as truth

Dr. Troftgruben goes on. "Much of this stems from hearing eschatological imagery in scripture wrongly. Its aim is not to predict the future as much as it is to offer a word of hope to encourage faithfulness in the present."

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-2125-36-6>

Candace Simpson, a Baptist minister in Brooklyn, has a similar interpretation to Dr. Troftgruben: “Words like these are so urgent because they do not describe the future. They describe the present.”<sup>3</sup>

I feel this is a lesson about our faith and our faith tradition that I am learning over and over again:

- that prophets aren’t people who try to predict the future, they are people who give commentary on the ways society today is getting it wrong, or right, often by foretelling the possible futures that could befall a people if they don’t change their ways;
- that when Jesus promises that we will have a resurrection like his, he doesn’t just mean in some distant future after we all die, but that when we experience the daily deaths of this world there are also daily resurrections;
- and now, when Jesus is saying that the world will shake and the earth will tremble at the coming of the Son of Man, he doesn’t just mean in the future at the apocalypse, he means that as the Son of Man is brought to life in our lives, the powers and principalities of today will tremble and quake at the in-breaking of God’s justice, and love, and liberation

Our faith, the beloved grace and love of Jesus, is not just a faith of the horizon illuminating a path forward – something to anticipate in the future – it is a faith of our present circumstance

The Son of Man came into the world, will come into the world again, and – in between – comes into the world time and time again through the inspiration of the Spirit in you and in our lives

Just as there are examples of ways we experience death in our lives on a daily basis, there are also, regularly, ends of our worlds – they happen so often

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<sup>3</sup> Enfleshed Ministries. Liturgy That Matters. <https://enfleshed.com/>

When a loved one dies, the world you live in from that day forth is *not* the same world that you lived in while they were alive

When you are diagnosed with cancer or another chronic illness, the world in which you lived before that diagnosis is *not* the same world you live in after it

When you get or lose a job, when you meet the love of your life, when you become or can't become a parent, when you move from one geographic and cultural area to another, your world is not the same as before

And, there are times when collectively our world ends, too – monumental shifts in the ways we live our lives or the ways our lives are directed by culture, policy, and doctrines

We are constantly navigating the ends of our worlds, the earth trembles and shakes below us

And, from what Jesus says in this morning's gospel, it sounds like these are precisely the times we should expect to see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud"

that's a bit abstract, maybe I can phrase it differently

These are the moments that you might notice Jesus coming into your life

Still too abstract?

Take a moment to look around you, take a good look!

Because you "stand" – or in this case, sit, – "before the Son of Man" right now

In our baptisms, we are made one with Christ, and so, in fact, as you look around you this morning and you see the faces of those who gather with you – you see the face of Jesus looking back at you

Jesus teaches us that when you experience the ends of your worlds, you can anticipate to stand before the Son of Man embodied in.....(name people in the church)

There are so many ends of our worlds over our lifetimes – and I don't just mean all those predictions we've lived through – I mean all the ways our worlds have been flipped on our heads

And God does not hesitate to come to your side – through the Spirit, and through our brother Jesus and the ways in which we all embody his love, his mercy, his counsel, his grace, his forgiveness, his understanding, his justice

Dr. Troftgruben concludes: “Advent rightly focuses neither simply on Jesus’ future return nor on his arrival at Christmas, but also on his arrival today in daily life and faith. It does not take the end of all things or December 25 for someone to encounter Jesus in a profound way. And that encounter is worth looking for and embracing now.”

Let us not wait to see *if* Jesus enters our lives – four weeks from now or years from now – rather, notice *when* Jesus enters your life and brings that healing balm, that comforting shoulder, that precious love

And if the thunder roars and the lightning flashes – you are *not* getting your photo taken

But, when your earth shakes, the ground you walk on trembles, and your world ends - “stand up and raise your heads,” because love is near, hope is near, grace is near

Thanks be to God. Amen.