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Advent Awake

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Happy New Year!

Welcome to the liturgical season of Advent which is the first season in our liturgical calendar: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and the long season of Pentecost (sometimes referred to as “Ordinary Time”)

You may have thought that it’s the Christmas season already – the songs are on the radio, the decorations are up in people’s houses and in the stores, we had our fair yesterday – so I can understand why you might have thought it’s Christmastime already...but you would be wrong.

Before we get to the baby born in the manger on that Silent Night, we have four weeks of Advent: four weeks of anticipation, four weeks to prepare!

But if you look up the definition of “Advent” on Google, on top of “the arrival of a notable person, thing, or event” and the first season in the Christian liturgical year, you’ll also get this important definition: “the coming or second coming of Christ.”

The gospel reading from Mark’s gospel this morning aligns much more with this last definition and I find it a helpful reminder of this tri-fold theme of Advent: the advent of God coming to earth in the form of Jesus born in a manger, the advent of God coming into the hearts of all believers, and the advent of God coming again with Jesus the Christ at the end times

With the songs on the radio, the decorations in our homes and stores, and the wonderful fairs that help to put us in the Christmas mood, it can be easy to enter into this season of Advent thinking only of that first theme: God coming to earth as a baby born in a manger

And while that is an important theme, one which you'll likely hear sermons about this Advent season, Mark delivers us a seemingly apocalyptic text this morning that we cannot ignore

It feels rather intrusive, though, doesn't it?

"Excuse me, Mark! I was over here enjoying my hot cocoa and decorating my tree, how dare you bring up the parousia?! What a downer!"

But let me ask you this: are we really okay? Are we really in the Christmas spirit?

One of my fears this time of year is that the Christmas cheer, and the expectation to be cheerful during this holiday season, doesn't make space for the true pains and sorrows that continue to fill our days and our news

The Christmas lights bring cheer, but do they bring healing? The coca is delicious, but does it elicit a hopefulness in my spirit that gives me the courage to continue all my days?

For this reason, a lot of communities will make space for a "Blue Christmas" or "Longest Night" service around the time of the Winter Solstice – to make space for the feelings that arise this time of year that aren't cheer: feelings of guilt, grief, anger, dissociation

I am grateful that in this new season, which brings with it a new Gospel to guide our worship and studies, Mark kicks it off with an apocalyptic text about keeping awake for the return of our God into our lives not way back when, but now or in the days to come

It's helpful if we start by breaking down a bit what apocalyptic texts are doing – much like prophetic texts which, to some extent, we've been taught were these predictions of far off events that might come true in the future, but when you truly study the Bible you learn that prophetic literature and the prophets themselves were much more trying to shine a spotlight on

what's happening around them, the brokenness around them, and attempting to call people back to awareness of a path to wholeness: apocalyptic literature is *very* similar

Apocalyptic literature very much sounds like it is predicting something that will happen in the future – something spectacular and spooky at the same time!

But, if you study apocalyptic literature – like the books of Daniel and Revelation – they, like prophetic literature, are inviting listeners into a conversation about finding God again in the midst of a great ordeal

David Schnasa Jacobsen, Bishops Scholar in Homiletics and Preaching at Boston University School of Theology writes that “When we read apocalyptic texts generically, it is helpful to think of them as crisis literature. Something about a given moment calls into question the righteousness of God.”¹

In the case of Daniel it is the Babylonian captivity of God's people, Revelation it's the oppression of the Roman Empire, and in Mark's text today it's the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD – it's in the face of such crises that the people have lost sight of the righteousness, the goodness, of God.

“Apocalypses reach deeply into the symbolic fund and mythic resources of a tradition” Jacobsen continues, “in order to invoke divine transcendence in the face of such difficulty.”

Apocalyptic literature is crisis literature – speaking a word of hope, a word of connection, a reminder that God is not lost in the midst of despair and crisis - and doing so in spectacular and spooky stories that transcend reality so that we snap out of reality and remember God's transcendence...whoa

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-1324-37-4>

These are the kinds of stories that for generations made it possible for our forebears, as Dr. Jacobsen says, to “live forward amid the fragments and ruins” that surrounded them, and “to watch for the new thing God is doing in Advent.”

And that is our invitation, too

I don’t know all of the crises of your personal lives, but I know some of them, and I know the crises that swirl in our community, nation, and world

And God is speaking to us today through this story from Mark, through this apocalyptic story of waiting and anticipation: stay awake!

For as Karoline Lewis at Luther Seminary in Minnesota writes: “At the heart of apocalyptic literature is encouragement and hope. To some extent, this is Jesus at his pastoral best. That which looks like devastation and defeat will be God’s victory.”²

Encouragement and hope that in the dismal news cycle of wars and atrocities, when it is common and easy to lose sight of the goodness of God, God will break in, the advent of God is upon us, if we but stay awake to notice it

Even in the bleakest of circumstances, stay awake! God is still participating in the great narrative of creation

Exactly where you least expect God to be, God is

In the midst of crisis, God breaks forth – as a baby in a manger, as a presence in our hearts, as a force of justice, mercy, and forgiveness in this world

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-1324-37>

This is the wild and crazy truth about our God and about this season of the year: Advent – the time of waiting and preparing, the time for remembering to stay awake so that we might be witnesses to the in-breaking of God into our broken and messy world

In his sermon entitled, "The Face in the Sky," Frederick Buechner describes this spectacular and spooky truth about our God: "Those who believe in God" he wrote, "can never in a way be sure of him again. Once they have seen him in the stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of humankind. If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too."³

"...there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too."

In this Advent season, may we heed Jesus' calling to stay awake so that we might witness God alive in our world – not just as a baby 2,000 years ago, but today, now

Stay awake.

Amen.

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3637>