

Advent 1 Year A 2025

Today we begin a new liturgical year in the church.... The vestments have changed; the prayers as well.... And the mood has changed... not unlike the ambivalent season of the year come upon us again... The music of our lives has tended towards a minor key. We have finished our regular readings in Luke, and we have begun a year of readings from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is viewed by some commentators as the most 'Jewish' of the gospel authors. That's not altogether true.... The others are equally grounded in Hebrew scripture. All of early Christian literature swims, as it were, in the ocean of Judaism; but Matthew, more than the other Gospel writers is concerned with the *practice* of Torah: faith as practice.... His premise is that it is in practicing the rudiments of the faith that we come to believe... that practice informs believing.... To practice sacrifice, and compassion, and welcome, and non-violence and justice... empathy in short; then one comes to believe in sacrifice, and compassion, and welcome, and non-violence, and justice... all the means of empathy... we'll see that as we read through Matthew during the coming year....

So the church year begins with Advent, the time of preparation for Christmas, the birth of our Lord... a time of expectation and hope, but it is expectation and hope set against the fading light of day in our hemisphere. It is the time of the year when darkness falls upon us, literally... and yet Advent, paradoxically, is a season of hope, of expectation, of pregnancy, of possibility... a poignant contrast to be sure.... Life is that way when we're paying attention.... But in this ambiguous season the irony is all the more pressing. God shows up in irony.

“Lo he comes with clouds descending.” Those the first words of hymn 57, my favorite Advent hymn... we’ll sing it as this service comes to a close... words of the venerable Charles Wesley that I remember from childhood... words full of possibility for a dramatic coming of God’s anointed... God’s anointed who will set things right... God’s anointed who will at last defeat the powers of evil in the world.... A forceful testimony to the light overcoming the darkness.... How long, O Lord? The imagery of the Savior coming amid the clouds is found in the ancient lore of Israel.... Ancient even to the people of the first century.... It is an image out of the genre of Apocalyptic literature... literature that re-emerged in the second century B.C.E. during a time of great trial and oppression upon the people of Israel... Jerusalem and the Levant were occupied by the Assyrian despot Antiochus Epiphanies... Martial law was in effect.... Food was scarce... and to add insult to injury, the Jerusalem Temple was filled with the pagan iconography of the Assyrians... a deep wound to the dignity and sovereignty and psyche of the Jewish people.... During this period in Israel’s history, the world was falling apart (sound familiar?).... The world is always falling apart, is it not? The power of empire runs amok still; injustice and cruelty its calling card.... During this time when the world was falling apart, the biblical literature was chiefly concerned with ‘end times’.... The final consummation of God’s reign in earth... the Book of Daniel is one example with its bizarre, otherworldly imagery... also, the Book of Enoch, which never made it into the Hebrew canon of scripture, but was highly influential nonetheless with its mythic predisposition. Elaine Pagels, a biblical scholar and historian specializing in end-times theology, observes that in many cultures under stress, their

literature and art become apocalyptic... the literature of crisis, concerned with matters of dramatic and painful reordering... death and rebirth... unsettling revelation.

This Hebrew apocalyptic literature depicted God as a warrior dispelling the forces of oppression, and ushering in a reign of peace and well-being, and restored dignity.... A central figure in this literature is the mysterious 'Son of Man'... God's representative who comes in the clouds to earth... Matthew refers often to this imagery of the Son of Man, connecting him to the figure of Jesus, thereby connecting Jesus to the Apocalyptic lore of the tradition... Luke refers to the Son of Man only once... Mark and John never mention him.... But the imagery goes back even further in the tradition. In the Book of Proverbs, probably compiled during the Jewish exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E., the figure of Wisdom, the goddess, is portrayed as descending to earth in the clouds.... She is the creative force of the universe... God's master builder, she is called.... And in the Book of Proverbs, not only does she create the cosmos, but she brings justice, she teaches the ways of God... she protects God's people from error.... The implication being that the created order is still becoming from one apocalypse to the next... that the created order is not an end unto itself, never complete... but a dramatic and dynamic and restorative process, ever unfolding.

So for Matthew this coming new age is a creation story... that the creation story is still being told, that the creation is a process of ends and beginnings... that the way of the world is a dramatic cycle of death to the old and birth to the new... history tells us as

much; and that the predisposition of the faithful is to live in imaginative expectation of the coming of the new, and to hold fast to the belief that it is good.... And, that it is the practice of goodness that engenders our belief in the Good.... The apocalypse is always upon us, because that is the drama and pathos of the created order... that is reality. We've seen it before, and therefore we do not fear because all the signs, if we are paying attention... all signs point to the entire process as Good.... Our practice of the good, one such dramatic sign. Our vocation is to live with integrity amid the possibilities that germinate in our world, up and against a world in irresolvable crisis.

The older I get, the more I know that things just don't turn out the way I thought they would or the way I planned they would.... I could never in a million years have imagined my life as it is now.... The older I get the more I know that life is a succession of exquisite randomness... I am now, surer than ever, that God doesn't have a plan... but that amid the dark and the light, amid the old and the new, between the now and the not yet... God is improvising into being the beautiful and the true; their opposites that would prevent us notwithstanding... and Matthew's admonition to us this morning is that we keep awake to this glorious process.... Not so much becoming in high dramatic fashion from heaven... like coming in the clouds... but becoming nonetheless in high drama in the mundane matters of earth... in eating and drinking, in marrying, in the grinding of meal, Matthew's examples... God's advent is manifest in the common things of earth, no less dramatic than the majesty of the Apocalyptic conceit.... For this writer we call Matthew,

God's dramatic advent is manifest in every mundane act of love.... In acts of compassion and mercy, in loving kindness and doing justice... these are the rudiments of our practice as the baptized that will change the world, change the world as if God, Godself came among us with clouds descending.... And that coming bears telling with high metaphor and epic drama.... We can only speak of such things in the language of the imagination, the language of beauty.... Language that draws the mystery of God very near to us. The language of Shalom; the improbable peace that baffles our understanding.

Keep awake, good people... pay attention to the now.... As for the future, know that God doesn't have a plan other than to renew and restore our world... God doesn't have a plan other than to love the world into its perfection, in spite of its imperfection.... Perfection is not utopia. Perfection is living in the presence of Love. How that will happen, no one knows.... It will be improvised, chosen into being, and we are God's chosen participants in this improvisation of Love... we don't know how or when... I'm not so sure God knows how or when... but it will happen amid the random iterations of beauty and truth.... And our practice of the faith is a matter of trusting that process; and the knowledge that trusting in mere possibility is enough.

I do know this: This Advent in its ambiguous coming will be like birth... first pain, then a fragile but tenacious joy.... Take courage, good people... that is the way the world begins... as it always has... and as it always will.