

**The First Sunday of Advent (Year B) + November 29, 2020**  
**St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, Washington**

The liturgical year is like a great story with many chapters, and every Advent we go back to the beginning and tell it all over again. But it's an unusual story. It doesn't begin with "Once upon a time ..." No, it begins with "The End." Whether the gospel for the First Sunday in Advent is from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, we always get the apocalyptic Jesus announcing the end of the world. The sun and moon will go dark, the stars will fall from the sky, reality itself will tremble and shake.

It's the ultimate disaster movie, and we usually absorb it as such. The apocalyptic images of destruction and chaos engage our fears while they're up on the screen (or on the lips of the gospel reader), but when the lights come up and we head for the exit, we expect to find the same old safe and reliable world waiting for us outside the theater or the church. But in 2020, not so much!

The ending of worlds is far too real this year. COVID-19 has made us acutely conscious of our own impermanence, not only as individuals but as a species. Millions have seen their jobs disappear, education is in crisis, social gatherings are nearly extinct, and so many ordinary things, from restaurants to haircuts, not to mention liturgical assemblies, have vanished from daily experience. We've been shocked this year to discover how easily the stability of our democratic institutions can be assaulted and eroded, and we've been disheartened and unsettled by the fragility of our social bonds in the face of so much hatred, bigotry, demagoguery and violence. Truth itself has become an endangered species. And if all that isn't enough, the climate apocalypse is well underway.

"Signs of ending all around us," says one of our Advent hymns. Then it wonders:

Can it be that from our endings, new beginnings you create?  
Life from death, and from our endings, realms of wholeness generate?<sup>i</sup>

How will the world end? Let me count the ways, says the apocalyptic Jesus. But Jesus isn't trying to depress us. Jesus doesn't want to paralyze us with despair. But he does want us to be clear about where our treasure is, where our hope lies. Put your faith in the things that endure, he says. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."<sup>ii</sup>

I think what he's getting at here is that our idolatries, our invented securities, will come to nothing in the long run. Only God endures. Only God's Kingdom—the world of God—is built to last. So learn how to discern what lasts and what doesn't, and how to remain faithful to the vision without getting discouraged by the obstacles and failures along the way.

A common misconception about the apocalypse is that it only comes once, at the end of history, when the broken will be made whole, all discords harmonized, all divisions reconciled.

Christian faith indeed affirms that great vision of a perfected humanity and a restored creation. But our faith also calls us to make that future present wherever and whenever we can, and to notice how it's already happening around us. At the same time, we need to recognize the ambiguities of historical existence. God and not-God are like the wheat and the weeds—hard to tell apart until the final harvest. Stay awake, Jesus says. Pay attention. Sometimes the Kingdom is where you least expect it. Sometimes it doesn't look like anything you expected. And often it will come and go in the blink of an eye. Keep your eyes open!

Why must there be apocalypse? Why must so many things come to an end? In order for God's future to take place now, some of what is present needs to get out of the way to make room for the new thing God wants to happen. That's why we should speak about the end of the world not as a single, far-off event, but as the ending of *worlds* plural: the ending of all those things which need to pass away so we can get right with God.

An economy where millions lose their jobs and millions go hungry while the assets of 600 billionaires increase by 1 trillion dollars during the pandemic—that's got to go. The killing of people because they're black—that's got to go. The destruction of nature by greed and stupidity—that's got to go. You get the idea. God wants a better world, and God asks us not only to pray for that world but to work for it, and, by God's grace, to embody it and manifest it whenever and however we can.

But for reasons we are not given to understand as finite beings, the inbreaking of the Kingdom isn't a story of steady and relentless progress. We are indeed visionary creatures, full of desire for better selves and better worlds, but we are also finite and fallible, complicated mixtures of mud and spirit. We have our limits. We don't always know the right thing, or when we think we know, we don't do it, or can't do it. Or by the time we do, maybe it's no longer the right thing.

Good motives tend to produce mixed outcomes. And as for bad things, Scripture tells us that a creative God can make a silk purse from a sow's ear. Historical existence is complicated. It's messy. A lot of the time we're just guessing. We have to learn not to fall in love with outcomes, or get too attached to our ideas of the best future. Our God is a God of surprises, and most of our maps to the Promised Land turn out to be illusions, or at least out of date.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French Revolution stirred the imagination of Europe with a sense of immense possibility. Looking back on 1789 twenty-five years later, French observer Thomas Noon Talfourd described the incredible excitement in the air:

"Every faculty of the mind was awakened," he said, "every feeling raised to an intenseness of interest, every principle and passion called into superhuman exertions. At one moment, all was hope and joy and rapture; the corruption and iniquity of ages seemed to vanish like a dream; the unclouded heavens seemed once more to ring with the exulting chorus of peace on earth and good-will to men ... The most brilliant hopes were cherished ... and fresh prospects were daily opening which ... filled us with painful delight and with giddy rapture."<sup>iii</sup>

G.W.F. Hegel, the great German idealist, was 19 years old when that revolution happened. "It was a glorious dawn," he recalled later. "All thinking beings shared in the jubilation of the epoch. A sublime emotion ruled that age, and enthusiasm of the spirit thrilled through the world, as though the time were now come of the actual reconciliation of God with the world."<sup>iv</sup>

When the English poet William Wordsworth was a young man, he went to France to begin a walking tour in the summer of 1790, when revolutionary spirits were still high. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive," he wrote, "France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again."<sup>v</sup>

Those among us who came of age in the 1960s may remember the same exhilaration of being young and idealistic in a time of great upheaval and daring dreams. We had our "brilliant hopes" and "sublime emotion," our visions of a new world emerging from the ruins of the old.

But we would soon discover that a reborn humanity, reconciled to the purposes of God, was not so easily achieved. So too did the young Wordsworth grow disenchanted with the French Revolution's dark side. The Kingdom of God may work through the movements of history, but it is not identical with them. To confuse God and history is idolatry. Misplaced hope is worship of the wrong thing.

Fifteen years after his tour of revolutionary France, Wordsworth wrote his epic poem, *The Prelude*, a spiritual biography of his generation of Romantics and idealists. In Book VI of *The Prelude*, he explored his personal struggle with hope and disillusionment through the narrative of his excursion through France to the Alps. Making his way south, he feasted and danced with happy revolutionaries, tasting the bliss of their new world. As he put it, he "found benevolence and blessedness / Spread like a fragrance everywhere, like Spring."<sup>vi</sup>

But when he reached the Alps, he saw a troop of French soldiers plunder a peaceful mountain convent in the name of revolution and freedom from the oppression of religion. Actually, this desecration occurred two years later. But Wordsworth inserts it into his poem to dramatize with this single illustration his more gradual internal process of disappointment with the Revolution's betrayal of his generation's hopes.

In the poem, Wordsworth is shocked to witness the soldiers' destruction of the convent and the expulsion of its "blameless inmates." The revolutionary sword wields no justice in this act, only negation. The convent, a precious habitation of calm and spirit, set apart to remember eternity, perishes in a world gone mad.

As a disillusioned Wordsworth climbed higher in the Alps, he struggled with despair. He felt "inwardly oppress'd" by an "utter loss of hope itself, / And things to hope for."<sup>vii</sup> (A loss of "things to hope for." That is so 2020!) With the Revolution descending into the maelstrom of violence and naked power, where could he look for the true apocalypse that would break the power of the fallen world, renovate humanity, and restore the earthly paradise?

The climb itself began to form an answer in his heart and mind. “For still,” he tells us, “[he] had hopes that pointed to the clouds.”<sup>viii</sup> He was a Romantic, after all, fluent in the language of Nature. The soaring peak of Mont Blanc, rising into the sky above, was an icon of Transcendent power far greater than revolutions or armies—or the countless dejections of history.

We can imagine the music swelling here, as the poet approaches the summit to receive the grace of divine vision, reconciling in a flash all the contradictions of human existence. What actually happened was, Wordsworth got lost in the mist. Eventually, he ran into a peasant who told him that he’d already crested the pass and was in fact now going down other side. Though the poet’s hopes may have still pointed to the clouds, his body was on its way back to the complications of the world below.

Wordsworth would find in this experience a metaphor for the life of faith. We don’t get the decisive apocalypse, the ultimate finale, in this life. God is too inventive to settle for our flawed approximations of a better world. There’s always going to be a mixture of good and ill, darkness and light, in our historical projects, as well as in the circuitous journey of every soul. Still, God has planted hope and desire deep in our hearts, and amid all the complications and setbacks of the human journey, we keep reaching for the clouds, and that in itself is something glorious. As Wordsworth put it:

And now, recovering, to my soul I say  
‘I recognize thy glory.’  
... Our destiny, our nature, and our home  
Is with infinitude, and only there;  
With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
And something evermore about to be.<sup>ix</sup>

150 years after Wordsworth crossed the Alps, another poet, W. H. Auden, articulated his own understanding of the dance between disappointment and hope. As a political idealist in the 1930s, he would face his own disillusionment at the end of that decade. Revolutionary hopes for a better world had withered, and humanity, as far from the earthly paradise as it had ever been, was plunging into the inferno of the Second World War.

We hoped, we waited for the day  
The State would wither clean away,  
Expecting the Millennium  
That theory promised us would come,  
It didn’t.

Like Wordsworth—and all of us at the end of 2020—Auden was forced to accept the limits of historical existence, and to discern, as he put it, “what / Is possible and what is not, / To what conditions we must bow / In building the Just City now.”

And like Wordsworth, Auden finds himself on a mountain: Dante's Mount Purgatory, where the Earthly Paradise at the top is a distant goal, for which there are no shortcuts.

The purgatorial hill we climb,  
Where any skyline we attain  
Reveals a higher ridge again.  
Yet since, however much we grumble,  
However painfully we stumble,  
Such mountaineering all the same  
Is, it would seem, the only game ...

We have no cause to look dejected  
When, wakened from a dream of glory,  
We find ourselves in Purgatory,  
Back on the same old mountain side  
With only guessing for a guide ...

O once again let us set out,  
Our faith well balanced by our doubt,  
Admitting that every step we take  
Will certainly be a mistake,  
But still believing we can climb  
A little higher every time ...<sup>x</sup>

We're all on that mountain with the poet, still climbing, sheltering our hope like a candle in the winds of doubt, stumbling our way onward. Sometimes we lose the path, and go astray. And if we do attain a summit, a higher one still looms before us.

And all those apocalypses along the way, all those endings great and small, the vanishings of good things and bad things alike, turn out not to be last judgments or final judgments, bringing our story to a close. They are more like doors, where we pass from a tired world into a new reality.

As long as we are creatures of time and history, that reality will never be fixed or final. And with a God who is utterly free and endlessly inventive, who can describe what is to come? But if I may switch metaphors and poets, let me give you one of my favorite Advent images.

In her poem, "Rowing," Anne Sexton imagines herself rowing toward an island called God.

I am rowing, I am rowing,  
though the wind pushes me back  
and I know that that island will not be perfect,  
it will have the flaws of life,  
the absurdities of the dinner table,  
but there will be a door

and I will open it  
and I will get rid of the rat inside me,  
the gnawing pestilential rat.  
God will take it with his two hands  
and embrace it.

Sexton knows she's not there yet, she is still in the Advent space of waiting and hoping. And, like Auden, she is aware of what is possible and what is not, and to what conditions she must bow as a flawed and finite being in search of Grace.

"This story," she says, "ends with me still rowing."<sup>xi</sup>

This, dear people of God, is where we begin the Advent journey. On the sea of faith, still rowing. Or maybe back on the same old mountain side, with only guessing for a guide. But always holding fast to hope that can never die, as we wait and watch for "something evermore about to be."

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<sup>i</sup> Dean W. Nelson, "Signs of endings all around us," # 721 in *Wonder, Love, and Praise: A Supplement to The Hymnal 1982* (New York: The Church Pension Fund).

<sup>ii</sup> The Gospel for Advent 1 (Year B) is Mark 13:24-37.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Noon Talfourd, *The Poetical Talent of the Present Age*, 1815), cited in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), 329-330.

<sup>iv</sup> In Abrams, 352.

<sup>v</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathsn Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), X, 692 (1805), VI, 353-4 (1805). All citations from *The Prelude* are from this Norton Critical Edition.

<sup>vi</sup> *The Prelude*, VI, 368-369 (1805).

<sup>vii</sup> *The Prelude*, XI, 506 (1805).

<sup>viii</sup> *The Prelude*, VI, 587 (1850).

<sup>ix</sup> *The Prelude*, VI, 531-532, 538-542 (1805).

<sup>x</sup> W. H. Auden, "New Year Letter (January 1, 1940)," *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976). We hoped (175); what is possible (190); the purgatorial hill (178-179).

<sup>xi</sup> Anne Sexton, "Rowing," in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1975). This is the first poem in the book. In the last, "The Rowing Endeth," she finally reaches the island. God invites her to play poker. They both win, because that's how it goes with God. The text of "Rowing is here:

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/rowing/> ... "The Rowing Endeth" is here:

<https://opreach.org/2013/02/26/the-rowing-endeth/>