

Saint Stephen's

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
First Sunday of Advent – December 1, 2024

Apocalyptic Hope

Jeremiah 11:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thess. 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36



Moon and Stars (William Morris, 1834-1896)

[Luke 21:25-26] *Jesus said, "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. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.*

In his poem, “Little Gidding,” T.S. Eliot writes,

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*

These words have helped me in times of transition when I found myself trying to hold the past tightly with one hand while grasping for the future with the other, eliminating any potential for in-between. But Eliot reminds us that in order to embrace a new beginning, we must be willing to accept an ending. To open both hands, releasing the past and allowing the future to arrive in its own time, on its own terms. To dwell in the present time of expectant waiting.

Jesus teaches about such a time of waiting in the gospel today. This passage from Luke is called the “Little Apocalypse” because it uses stark imagery of violent change, echoing the Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah.

Remember that the original Biblical meaning of apocalypse is not end times destruction of the world, but the revelation of divine wisdom and

presence that activates a turning point in history.¹ It may not be gentle, but it ushers in a new age of justice and restoration.

Jesus uses this kind of apocalyptic language while teaching in the Jerusalem temple. Passover is drawing near, while Judas plots with the chief priests and scribes to betray Jesus.

There is a sense of foreboding, a growing unease as Jesus points out the hypocrisy and injustices of the temple community. People get rich by exploiting the poor and then contribute to the treasury with a sense of scarcity, while a poor widow offers all she has left, a true gift of abundance.

When the disciples are wowed by the grandeur of the temple, Jesus brings them back to reality. “The day is coming,” he says, “when all these stones will be thrown down. There will be great distress on the earth; Jerusalem will be trampled, and you yourself will face persecution.”

The disciples ask, “when will this be?” And Jesus replies, “There will be signs in the heavens and nations will be

¹ Society of Biblical Literature. The SBL Study Bible (p. 3518). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

confused by roaring seas and waves. When these things take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

It's a paradoxical idea, that when the foundations of the world as we know it are shaken, it is not a time to shrink back in fear but a time to stand up and pay attention, expecting liberation and the inbreaking of something new.

For the early Christian community that first heard the gospel of Luke, their redemption would look like release from the bondage of the Roman Empire. Freedom from political corruption, economic inequity, and threat of violence to maintain peace. For them, the inbreaking of God's realm of justice and restoration would require such an upheaval of the status quo that apocalyptic imagery was the only way to convey hope.

When I consider today's gospel in our own context, I am struck by the vision of “distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.” It seems to accurately describe our planet's experience of extreme weather, which is made more likely and more severe by climate change.

The eco-theologian Sallie McFague hears this gospel passage as a call to “face up to the reality that we are not in charge of the world and are already having to live with what we have done to creation by refusing to live within its ecological rules.”²

Perhaps redemption today isn't liberation from an occupying political power but liberation from the worldview that tolerates the destruction of creation as something theoretical or inevitable. If I don't experience extreme weather, it can't be that bad. It's a global problem, so reducing my carbon emissions won't make a difference.

Which brings me to the topic of hope. In some Christian traditions, each of the four candles in the Advent wreath symbolizes a foundational spiritual virtue. The first candle is known as the “hope candle” or the “prophet's candle.” It is meant to remind us of the truth-tellers who expose the brutal realities of their day while standing firmly in hope. People who trust in God's power for change and want to witness and participate in divine renewal.

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-11/prophet-s-candle>

We Christians are people of hope. The first letter to Peter instructs the early church to “always be ready to account for the hope that is in you.”³ So where do we find our hope without looking away from the injustice and suffering in our world?

Using climate change as an example, the secular world might find hope in the willingness of people, communities, and nations to work hard and put the needs of others before themselves. We might name our confidence in scientific discovery and intellectual creativity to solve intractable problems.

These reasons for hope are real. But hope that rests solely on human action or the ability to imagine a better future is a meager hope. Cynthia Bourgeault writes,

*Our mistake is that we tie Hope to outcomes. Not right. Hope is a primordial force that boils up from the center of the earth in our own being, and gives us the capacity to be truly present and strong, whatever the circumstances.*⁴

This primordial force is the radical transcendence of God, the source of creative, liberating love that is the only thing in the universe to have no beginning and no end. God is the source, the medium, in which we and our fragile earth exist.

But hope founded in the nature of God alone rather than our own skills or resources is not an escape from personal responsibility -- “Let God do it.” It is a fundamental reorientation that loosens our grip on knowing the outcome so we can show up faithfully, compassionately, in places of need.⁵

The spiritual journey of Advent is captured in the Spanish verb *esperar*, which means both “to wait” and “to hope.” Hoping and waiting are bound together. So, we open both hands, releasing the past and allowing the future to arrive in its own time, on its own terms.

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*

Amen.

³ (1 Peter 3:15)

⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God*.

⁵ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*.