

The Terror of Advent

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Advent begins with the cry, “O, that you would rend the heavens and come down!” (Isaiah 64:1). The cry arises from the anguish of the world and the pain in the human heart. Without this cry of distress and the longing for God to act, Advent becomes little more than a sentimental celebration played out with bathrobes, straw, paper angel wings, a glittery star, crowns, and imagined donkey, sheep, and camels.

Advent begins with a profound sense of the absence of God. Where is God when mass shootings ravage the land, war rages without any end in sight, children around the world starve, migrants flee oppression and poverty, and a superheated planet breeds floods, fires, and deadly storms? Where is God when justice for the poor and the marginalized seems far away, when child abuse and domestic violence are rampant, and overflowing prisons are little more than warehouses for human beings whom society refuses to treat as human. Where is God? “O that you would rend the heavens and come down!”

Advent is the season of longing for God. Only God can bridge the gap between the way things are and the way God intends the creation to be. Advent begins with this impassioned cry for God, and then it speaks of the ways in which God has acted, God acts today, and God will act at the end of time.

The pivotal moment of God’s action takes place in an insignificant town in Galilee when the angel startles a young girl with the news that she will be the mother of Jesus, the son of the Most High God. William Butler Yeats captures both the mystery and the terror of that moment in his poem, “The Mother of God.”

What is this flesh I purchased with my pains,
This fallen star my milk sustains,
This love that makes my heart’s blood stop
Or strikes a Sudden chill into my bones
And bids my hair stand up?

God has acted in the birth of Jesus. From that moment, the Scriptures reflect on the identity and meaning of Jesus as the Messiah in the line of David. The theological highpoint of that reflection is found in the Prologue of John which speaks of Jesus as the incarnate eternal Word of God. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). When the Word is made flesh, the creation is transformed. The divine invades and unites with the world of space, time, and matter. The priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins understood the sacred nature of a God-invaded creation when he opened his poem, “God’s Grandeur” with the words, “The world is charged with

the grandeur of God.” Not only is the creation charged with the presence of the holy, but human life itself is transformed.

Through the power of the resurrection, Christ becomes incarnate in us. As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). The challenge is how do we live a resurrected life in a new creation when the old world with its dying power presses in upon us.

In my last year of college, a friend and I worked as night tutors in a Boys’ Home. We went from desk-to-desk to check English papers, call out vocabulary, review science questions, and untangle math problems. The boys were struggling, not just with homework, but with life. Most of the boys came from dysfunctional homes; most of them didn’t want to be there. They acted out their anger at school and at the Boys’ Home. I watched the housemother interact with the boys. She was firm but loving. I didn’t know how she found such patience.

One night my friend and I were venting our frustration to her. She said, “I guess I have learned the importance of persistence. These boys have known adults who disappoint them, beat them, yell at them, ignore them, and give up on them. At times I find myself not liking some of them very much, but it doesn’t mean I stop loving them. I tell myself that no matter what I think, they belong to Jesus. One day I will see his face clearly in each one of them.” She knew the Advent truth that the incarnate Christ dwells in each one of us. She never gave up on them. She never stopped looking to see his face in their faces.

God delights in the things that flow unconsciously out of a life shaped by the Spirit. True discipleship is a habit of the heart. When our character conforms to Christ’s character, then practicing love, mercy, and justice is not something we have to think about; it just becomes a part of who we are.

Not only has God acted in the birth of Jesus, but God continues to act. Since Advent is the celebration of the coming of God into a broken and longing world, it is also the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the gathered church. In the church calendar, we mark the coming of the Spirit as the Pentecost miracle, but Advent looks to the daily experience of God in the life of the believer and in the life of the church. In the Gospel of Mathew, between the announcement of his passion and the experience of the transfiguration, Jesus tells his disciples, “There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matthew 16:28). Could Jesus have been wrong? All of the disciples died before the Second Coming of Jesus in power. Perhaps, he intended something else. When Stephen was being stoned to death, he lifted his eyes and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God in heaven (Acts 7:55). Could Advent not also recognize and lift up the many ways in which we experience God’s presence and power in our living and dying?

Some years ago, a young father in our congregation was diagnosed with an incurable cancer. He, his wife, and two children were devastated. He was struggling

emotionally, physically, and spiritually. He couldn't understand why this was happening and couldn't imagine dying and leaving his young family. Each time I visited him he asked hard questions to which there are no easy answers—if there are any answers at all. With whatever response I made or words of comfort I offered, I could hear the sound of a cheap tin bell ringing in my ear. Words were cheap. Mostly, I listened. I was distressed and frustrated that he would die without coming to any sense of acceptance or peace. One day, I got word that he was in the hospital; he had fallen into a coma. In the room, his wife was standing on one side of the bed, and I was standing on the other. Suddenly, he woke up. He was looking beyond the end of the bed at something or someone. He said in the most peaceful voice, "Oh, now I see." He turned to his wife, told her that he loved her, and died. In such holy moments, the veil that separates heaven and earth becomes thin and porous. In such moments, the presence of God answers the Advent cry of longing and despair.

The Spirit of God in Christ transforms the mundane into the magnificent and the ordinary into the extraordinary. In our Advent longing, we look around us and within us to discover the holy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's well-known verse captures the Advent challenge to perceive the presence of God that often goes unnoticed in the crush of the world.

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God.
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware.

Like Moses, we take off our shoes, rest, and are renewed in the holy presence.

Advent is about the past, the present, and the future. God has acted in the birth of Jesus, the Spirit of God in Christ is active in the world, and God will act at the end of history. Advent looks to the Second Coming of Christ and the final judgment of history. In a world in which the innocent suffer and the wicked seem to triumph, the Scriptures speak of the return of Christ as the day when wrongs will be righted, all wounds healed, and death shall be no more. The parables of Matthew 25 invite us to be prepared for the return of Christ, to take risks in the here and now for the sake of the kingdom, and to practice in our daily living compassion, justice, and love. Some may relish the idea of Christ's return as the day when all the "evil doers" will get what's coming to them. The return of Christ is not only about justice. It is also about mercy. We tend to think of justice and mercy as different virtues; we may even think of them as opposites. Our practice of justice and mercy is imperfect. God's justice and God's mercy are the same thing. They are two dimensions of God's love.

In our skeptical world, many people, both within and beyond the church, may question the biblical and theological images of the *Parousia* as so much smoke and mirrors. The return of Christ seems long delayed. Even within the New Testament, there is evidence that some expected the triumphant return of Christ within their life-

time (Mark 9:1; Thessalonians 4:15-18; Revelation 1:1; Hebrews 10:23-25). Now that 20 centuries have passed, what do we make of the promised return of Christ? Have we become like the narrator in T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" who concludes, "This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but with a whimper." Will things simply fall apart? Will human life destroy itself? Will our sun become a planet-devouring black hole? Will the universe collapse into itself or spin into greater and greater empty space?

We do not know. But we know this: the biblical promise is that history has meaning and value. Jesus is Lord of history. Although we cannot unravel all mysteries or know how or when the end will be, we can know that our destiny and the destiny of all things are in his hands. Jesus said that not even the Son of Man knows when that moment will be (Mark 13:32). Yet, we watch and wait for that moment in hope and expectation. This future impinges upon the way we live in the present. Trusting in the future, we may live with courage in this present troubled time.

Knowing that the future belongs to Christ shapes our moral actions and our ethical norms. In Albert Camus's novel *The Fall*, the narrator says, "Do not wait for the last judgment. It happens every day." Although Camus's meaning and intention were quite different from our understanding, we hear his words to mean that we live and act as if the last judgment is today. All of our actions are judged by their coherence with the plans and purposes of God for creation. When we are called upon to act in difficult situations, we align ourselves with the teachings of the gospel and we entrust our lives to the Coming One. The words of Micah, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus in the synagogue, the parables, the moral guidance of Romans, and countless other key texts form our thinking, speaking, and acting. There is freedom to act when we know that Jesus holds and keeps us whatever the outcome of our actions. We don't have to win, but we have to witness.

One of the great leaders of the Montgomery bus boycott was an elderly woman known as Mother Pollard who refused the suggestion that she quit the boycott because of her age. She said that her feet were tired, but her soul was rested. Her words echoed throughout the boycott and gave encouragement to others. She did not know how or when the boycott would end or what the outcome would be. Yet, she did not give up because she knew the future was in the hands of Christ.

One night during the boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at a church rally. After he spoke, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and asked him what was wrong because he did not speak well that night. He brushed it off. She persisted and said that she knew something was wrong. She told him not to worry because the people gathered there were with him to the end, and even if they were not with him that God would take care of him (Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*).

The final victory belongs to God. Our task is to persevere in our efforts to be witnesses to the love and justice of Christ in a hurting world. There are many global concerns of overwhelming magnitude: endless wars, oppression, hunger, injus-

tice, violence, homelessness, international migration, and global warming. Only by keeping our eyes on Jesus as Lord of history and empowering Spirit can we gain the perspective we need to act and not be paralyzed. When we do not have confidence in the final outcome of any endeavor, we shrink from giving our best to the task at hand. We look at the odds and give up. When we have the confident faith that God will use our small efforts to achieve a greater good that we may never see, then we are empowered and set free to act with bold determination.

This Advent, of the many concerns that weigh heavy upon us, consider lifting up in preaching, teaching, and community action the issues of gun violence in the United States and global warming. The overwhelming number of mass shootings in the States can numb the conscience and lead many to accept gun violence as normal. So far this year there have been on average almost two mass shootings a day; there have been many more deaths by guns including suicides, accidents, and homicides. Our children and youth are among the targets. How do we welcome the Prince of Peace in a culture that is addicted to guns? The pious “thoughts and prayers” response is not enough. This is a public health issue. This is a moral issue. The Second Amendment right to bear arms is not an absolute right. When the rights of citizens to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are endangered by the proliferation of automatic and military-style weapons in civilian hands, limitations must be placed on this Second Amendment right. Such limitations should include restricting types of weapons sold, background checks, red flag laws, gun safety training, and many more. At this time in our culture, stopping gun violence demands political action. Up to date information and statistics are easy to find. It is important to build a theological foundation to the efforts to curb gun violence. Even as we use the wisdom, skills, and resources we have, we cannot know the final outcome of our efforts. Yet, we live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ who gives us the divine imperative to protect life.

The Scriptures teach us of the Creator’s love for the whole world. The psalmist declares, “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). As we look for the Coming of Christ, we know that we will be held accountable for how we have cared not just for friends, family, neighbors, church, but for all humanity, all creatures, and all the created world. As followers of Jesus, creation care is our calling. The recent global tragedies of floods, fires, earthquakes serve as a wakeup call to the indifferent. It is a clarion call to the church to be engaged in efforts to reduce carbon emissions, practice sustainable agriculture, change consumeristic lifestyles, support renewable energy, act politically, and much more.

Some years ago, I spoke about global warming in a Sunday sermon on the gift of creation and our role in caring for the earth. After the first service, a member said that I couldn’t talk about global warming as it was “political.” During the second service, a member of the choir got up in a huff and walked out during the sermon. In a conversation that week, he told me that “global warming” was a hoax. He said it all depended on where the scientists put the thermometers. I thought to myself,

“Tell that to the polar bears who are losing their environment.” In both cases I had to remind myself that we are to be obedient to what we believe Jesus calls us to be and do. He is the one to whom we will be accountable on the last day. As Camus noted, we do not wait until the last day. The last day is here and now.

The season of Advent opens with the cry for God to come down to a hurting, broken world. In answer to the human cry, Advent lifts up the ways in which God entered human life and transformed the created world in the birth of Jesus; how God in Christ comes in the Holy Spirit to awaken us to the truth and to empower us to live faithful lives; and how Christ will come again at the end of history to restore all things.

There is something terrifying about Advent. When the angels appeared in the night sky to sleepy shepherds, it is no wonder they were filled with fear. Something new was about to happen that would change their lives and the life of the world forever. The heavens opened and God came crashing into their world. Advent is the beginning of this threefold experience of God—the loving God who acted, acts, and will act again. W.B. Yeats expressed the startling dimension of Advent when he opened his poem “The Mother of God” with these words: “The threefold terror of love; a fallen flare/Through the hollow of an ear . . .” Indeed, there is something terrifying about the love of the triune God. It is terrifying because it demands everything of us.