

3 men died and went to heaven. St. Peter met them at the front gate and said, "Heaven is a great big place, and we'll assign you a vehicle to get around in based on how faithful you were to your spouse."

So he gave the first man a Cadillac, the 2nd one got a Chevrolet, and the 3rd one received a motorcycle. The one who got the motorcycle was somewhat disappointed, but he figured that it was fair, based on his degree of faithfulness. He went driving down one of the streets of heaven, and he saw the man who got the Cadillac parked on the curb, and he was crying loudly. He stopped and asked, "What in the world are you crying about? You got the Cadillac!" "I know," said the man, "but I just saw my wife go by on a skateboard."

First, some background on the gospel text. This opening of Advent gospel is often called Mark's "Little Apocalypse." 'Apocalypse' means 'revelation' and is the name of a genre of literature that is mysterious in nature and flourished in time of crisis, this particular crisis being the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. It begins at the very outset of this chapter 13 from which we just read. The context of the discussion is that the disciples have been awed by the size and beauty of the Jerusalem temple. And Jesus predicts that the temple will be torn down and there will be great troubles. (13:1, 13:2, 13:14-23)

These words of warning occur just before the Passion Narrative, the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death. With the temple torn down, where will the people find God? The answer, of course, is not in the glorious temple but on the cross. Not in the city proper but outside the city walls on Calvary. Not in the center of power and authority but in the thin preacher from Galilee. Mark's primary theological question makes a good Advent question: Where will we look for God this Advent season?

Commentators suggest that this entire 13th chapter gives conflicting messages about Christ's return, the end of the world, and the coming apocalypse. It appears that Mark cobbled this section together from 2 apocalyptic tracts that share an apocalyptic vision – but with competing ideas about the significance of the apocalypse. Part urges early Christians to get ready for a soon-to-come apocalypse, and another seems to urge Christians to dig in and be faithful for the long haul.

So we have a paradox of a reading. We don't have to worry ourselves about whether or not the end is near or far from us. The main thing is to ask ourselves the immediate question: What does the notion of the end, and end of our history, the advent of God mean for us here and now?

A related question: Will we be prepared for the God we might find? We have to 'be alert,' 'keep watch,' 'stay awake,' in order to discern what is authentically of God.

Apocalyptic literature is not meant to be threatening about the future; it's meant to be encouraging and hopeful in the present. Jesus is giving pastoral care to those who are fearful about cataclysmic events in the present. The beloved temple will be destroyed but perhaps that destruction can make way for a new and different kind of divine presence. God will be with us but in a way other than at the temple. A cross will not be the end but God's way with us. A child born in backwater Bethlehem will be God-with-us.

God has chosen to enter history, our history – in order to turn our history toward God's ends. Things could get bumpy along the way. God refuses to be aloof in heaven on high but gets down and dirty with us right here where we are, even in the midst of a pandemic, our current apocalyptic moment. (adapted from Willimon, Oct-Dec 2020, p. 27-28)

Second, these words of Jesus are coupled with the words of Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah is the perfect voice for us at this particular moment in our history. A prophet is NABI in Hebrew – meaning a person who is able to see and hear what others cannot or will not see or hear. A NABI is a person who stands before a community to say, “God is working. Open your eyes and ears and see what God is doing.” Isaiah was preaching to a community even more devastated than our current COVID moment. The nation of Israel was in tatters – scattered and in exile. The temple destroyed, the kings gone. And the people responded a lot like we do. It’s an ancient biblical custom – COMPLAINING! “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, while you wrought awesome deeds....” (IS 63:16b-17) We are told the national pastime of our nation is baseball. Nah. The national pastime for Americans is complaining. We complain about our work, the economy, the pandemic, the masks, the social distancing, the pastor and the church. WAIT A MINUTE! You mean someone actually complains about father wonderful, MOI?! I had a sign on my door in Fayetteville that said: “The 2 most important qualities of a pastor today are an impenetrable epidermis and a sharp sense of the ridiculous. After 41 years, I AM pretty thick-skinned – and I have a pretty good sense of humor.

But apocalyptic literature reminds us God is working. Open your eyes and see what God is doing. The NABI, the prophet says: “If you want peace of mind, give peace to others. If you want to experience God’s presence, then be God’s presence to someone else. If you want life to be different, start acting upon what you see instead of sitting back and complaining about what you don’t see. If you are unhappy about the way things are, stop writing letters to the Editor, the Bishop and the Pastor, and in God’s name go to some hurting place and be God’s presence. If you want the pandemic to end, then follow instructions and care for others by practicing good safety. If you are unhappy about the way things are in the Church, stop the church gossip, roll up your sleeves and get to work. (adapted freely from GRACEWORKS, p. 1-2, 29 Nov 2020)

Third, apocalyptic literature and Advent remind us to claim our Incarnational spirituality – the fact that God is found in the flesh – INCARNATUS – ‘en-fleshed’. And our incarnational spirituality tells us that God is FOREVER coming in the flesh. “Jesus is apt to come into the very midst of life at its most real and inescapable. Not in a blaze of unearthly light, not in the midst of a sermon, not in the throes of some kind of religious daydream, but....at supper time, or walking along a road....He never approached from on high, but always in the midst, in the midst of people, in the midst of real life and the questions that real life asks.” (Frederick Buechner, THE MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT, pages not noted) “God comes to us not where we should have been if we had made all the right choices in life; not where we could have been if we had taken every opportunity that God has offered us; not where we wish we were if we didn’t have to be in the place where we find ourselves; not where we think we are because our minds are out of sync with our hearts; not where other people think we are or think we ought to be when they are attending to their own agendas. God meets us where we really are.” (Margaret Silf, INNER COMPASS: AN INVITATION TO IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY, 2009, pages not noted)

Advent reminds us that we believe in a God who comes down. From beyond time and space, down past the galaxies and all the heavens, in an event that surpasses our grandest attempt to get our little brains around it, God has come down. In the little town of Bethlehem, in a lowly manger. He came as a tiny babe born to a humble couple from a backward village called Nazareth. God has come down. That which Isaiah prayed for has happened. God has come down in the person of Jesus Christ, and He is the answer to our suffering and sin and pandemic.

There is a play written in 1945 by a German pastor named Guenter Rutenborn. The story was set at a time when Germany was still reeling from the tragic impact of World War II.

Many people in Germany were agonizing with the question of who was responsible for the terrible agony that the Second World War had brought upon the world. Characters in the play voiced the opinions of those who were looking for answers. Was Hitler alone responsible? How about the munitions manufacturers who financed him? Did an apathetic German population share the blame?

But then a man comes up out of the crowd and says, “Do you want to know who is really to blame for all the suffering we’ve been through? I’ll tell you. GOD is to blame. He is the one who created this world. He is the one who has let it be what it is.” Soon everyone on stage is echoing the same indictment: “God is to blame. God is to blame.”

And so, God is put on trial for the crime of creating the world....and is found guilty. The judge sentences God to what he considers to be the worst of all sentences. He sentences God to live on this earth as a human being. 3 archangels are given the task of carrying out the sentence.

The first archangel walks to the end of the stage and says, “I’m going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it’s like to be obscure and to be poor. He will be born on the backside of nowhere with a peasant girl for His mother. There will be a suspicion of shame about His birth, and He will have to live as a Jew in a Jew-hating world.”

The 2nd archangel adds to that harsh penalty: “I’m going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it’s like to fail and to suffer disappointment. No one will ever understand what He is trying to do.”

The 3rd archangel said, “I’m going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it is like to suffer. I’m going to see to it that He has all kinds of physical pain. At the end of His life, He’s going to be absolutely executed in as painful a way as possible.”

Then the 3 archangels disappear and the houselights go down. And we are given a few moments in darkness as the reality dawns that God has already served His sentence. He knew what it’s like to be obscure and to be poor. He knew what it’s like to fail and to suffer disappointment. He knew what it’s like to suffer an excruciating death. He experienced it all in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the answer to pandemic, to suffering and sin. He has come down, but the world has yet to receive Him. For you see, what He offers us is Himself alone. We want hope. He is hope. We want peace. He is peace. We want healing. He is healing. We want love. He is love. The problem is we want hope, but we don’t want Him. We want peace, but we don’t want Him. We want healing, but we don’t want Him. We want love, but we don’t want Him. We want to achieve a world without suffering or sin, but we do not want to open our lives so that He might begin His healing and reconciling work through us. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2020, p. 53-54)

Advent-Apocalyptic literature reminds us He has come. Will we open our hearts to receive Him? Amen.