

Jay was having some health issues, had some x-rays and several blood tests taken one morning, and an endoscopy. He guessed that someone messed up all the tests, because his primary care doctor called him to say he needed to see Jay in his office as soon as possible. Jay went to the doctor's office around 3:00 pm. The doctor said, "Jay, I don't know how to tell you this, so I will just come right out and say it. You only have 12 hours to live."

That depressed Jay. He went home and told his wife Sally. She was depressed too -but not quite as depressed as he was. She asked, "Jay, what are we going to do?" He said, "Well, we are going out and have the finest meal we have ever eaten. Then we are going to invite our friends over so I can wish them well. After that, we will embrace until we fall asleep." They did that and then went to bed. He snuggled up to Sally, and she said, "Will you cut that out? I got to get up in the morning – and you don't!"

First, some background on apocalyptic literature in general, which is a big part of the readings we hear during this season of Advent. The thirteenth chapter of Mark's gospel, from which we just read, is called the 'little apocalypse.' Jesus speaks of the present moment in an apocalyptic way – that is, a time of revelation. Now this discourse was occasioned by questions about the fall of the temple. The temple, that great center of national pride and hope will be utterly destroyed. And yet, Jesus gives the bad news that even more than destruction is to come. Perhaps the end of the temple as a place to interact with God will signify a new beginning in our interactions with God. Believers must be careful in how they interpret these signs of the times. Is this a time of impending doom or a time of new life? Maybe a bit of both.

Three times we are told to "watch out! Stay alert!" (vv 33, 35, 37). We must not only be awake and conscious but also faithful and wise in our interpretation of an apocalyptic, or revelation, moment. In times of trial and testing, we are called to have faith that God's purposes are being worked out for the good, whether we realize it or not at the time. And Jesus does not hold back from saying that promised good may come with disruption and even suffering.

These verses note that God's vindication work is not tied to any human program, to any political scheme, or to any human institution, including – perhaps especially – the church. God's work is larger than that, cosmic, even. The events that are named come as part of the actions of God, not from any human striving. With re-creation comes some shattering, with the planting of something new there is also the dismantling of something that has gone before.

Apocalyptic unveiling promises that God is at work above and beyond – sometimes in spite of – our human striving. Beyond the rise and fall of our empires, there comes God's promised reign. Even the worst and trying of times are, as all of our time, held in the hands of an active, loving God.

Human history moves along in fairly predictable paths. But then, occasionally, by the grace of God, God enters human time and takes hold of our history, provoking genuine newness. Although Christ is light and love, His advents, His coming to us in our place and time can instigate change in us and that change can be costly, even painful. Sometimes the world does to us what it did to Christ. Whenever Christ shows up, be prepared for the birth of something new that humanity could not create for ourselves.

We might think that Jesus, as He comes to the end of His earthly ministry and the horrible torture that awaits Him, might promise His frightened followers some reward and bliss for their trouble. No. Jesus is frank that His promised kingdom, the newness that He brings comes with suffering.

We're at the beginning of the church year which is also a time of ending. Both the pain of parting with the old and the pain of embracing the unknown new are before us on this First Sunday of Advent. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2023, p. 30-31)

Second, an illustration of this kind of Advent, apocalyptic watching. Columnist David Brooks has written a book called HOW TO KNOW A PERSON: THE ART OF SEEING OTHERS DEEPLY AND BEING DEEPLY SEEN. In it, he writes about the human need "to connect....to have another person look into our faces with love and acceptance." As a journalist, he observes "I often find myself interviewing people who tell me they feel unseen and disrespected: Black people feeling that the systemic inequities that afflict their daily experiences are not understood by whites, people who live in rural areas feeling they are overlooked by coastal elites, people across the political divides staring at one another with angry incomprehension, depressed young people who feel misunderstood by their parents and everyone else, husbands and wives who realize that the person who should know them best actually has no clue about who they are.

"I've noticed along the way that some people are much better at seeing people than others are. In any collection of humans, there are diminishers and there are illuminators. Diminishers are so into themselves, they make others feel insignificant. They stereotype and label. If they learn one thing about you, they proceed to make a series of assumptions about who you must be.

"Illuminators, on the other hand, have a persistent curiosity about other people. They have been trained or have trained themselves in the craft of understanding others. They know how to ask the right questions at the right times – so that they can see things, at least a bit, from another's point of view. They shine the brightness of their care on people and make them feel bigger, respected, lit up...."

The best illuminators among us, Brooks has found, are good "confidants – the people we go to when we are troubled.... They take in your story, accept it, but prod you to clarify what it is you really want, or to name the baggage you left out of your overly perfect tale. They're not here to fix you; they are here simply to help you edit your story so that it's more honest and accurate. They're here to call you by name, as beloved. They see who you are becoming before you do and provide you with a reputation you can then go live into."

Fr. Richard Rohr writes that faith and spirituality begin with 'seeing. It's not about earning or achieving. It's about relationships rather than results or requirements.' Theologian John Garvey puts it even more succinctly: the spiritual life is about 'paying attention,' or 'watching' in the language of today's gospel, paying attention to the voice of God, the hand of God, the love of God in every joy and sorrow, in every pain and trauma, in every victory and setback before us. Advent calls us to be 'illuminators' of the love and peace of God in our midst, opening one another's life to the possibilities for experiencing the healing and completeness of the Messiah who comes in Christ. (GRACEWORKS, Dec 3, 2023)

And finally, an illustration of an illuminator – in the midst of a horrific apocalyptic event. Just a little over a month ago, Lewiston, Maine, was the site of yet another terrible mass shooting, where 18 people were killed, first in a bowling alley, and then a nearby tavern. The victims ranged in age from a 14-year-old boy and his dad who were bowling together to a couple in their 70's who died protecting children from the shooter.

One of the victims was Joseph Walker, the popular manager of Schemengees Bar and Grille. When the gunman entered the tavern with his automatic weapon, Walker went after him with a butcher knife to try to stop him, but Walker was immediately shot and killed. He was 57, a father and grandfather.

The following day, Joseph Walker's father, Leroy Walker, spoke to CNN. In the emotional interview, Leroy Walker said that despite his pain, he could not bring himself to hate the shooter. Visibly emotional, Leroy Walker explained:

"If the person was, at the time, in his right mind, I believe he would have been a loving person just like we are. I just can't hate him.....You can't run around this world hating people. If you do, these kinds of things will happen more and more.....If you hate and the hate drives you crazy, you're going to hurt people.....And I'm sure this man, whatever happened to his mind, I'm sure he wasn't born to be a killer, and I'm sure his father and mother would have never believed this would have happened with him. So all I can say is I'm sorry that it's happened to all of us, and I'm sorry what happened to him. And God will prevail. Hate will never bring my son back."

That is to be alert – to watch – in moments of crisis and despair – and to bring Christ's presence 'to birth' in our own acts of compassion, forgiveness and generosity.

God is in every moment every day – happy and sad, wonderful and tragic. WATCH! Be an illuminator, a forgiver, a lover, a generous and kind person. Bring Christ's presence to birth in our world. Amen. (story from CONNECTIONS, 3 December 2023)