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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

December 1, 2024

Year C, 1 Advent, Revised Common Lectionary

[Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)

[Psalms 25:1-9](#)

[1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#)

[Luke 21:25-36](#)

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How you feel about the end of the world has a lot to do with how this world is treating you.

A lot of the earliest disciples of Jesus were poor and on the margins. Some of them were laborers, some were peasants, some were slaves. When you already live on the edge of being hungry or getting arrested or assaulted, the idea that this world is about to be turned upside down can sound comforting. Not as much so if you're relatively comfortable already. There's a reason it's been said that the good news of Jesus comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.¹

¹ Actually a phrase coined by Finley Peter Dunne to describe the role of journalism, but often used in the twentieth century in connection with preachers and Christian social reformers like Dorothy Day. See "God Comforts the Afflicted and Afflicts the Comfortable," <https://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/god-comforts-the-afflicted-and-afflicts-the-comfortable/>; cf. James Allaire and Rosemary Broughton, "An Introduction to the Life and Spirituality of Dorothy Day," <https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/life-and-spirituality.html>.

When I was in graduate school I did a study once of the Advent hymns of the Episcopal Church in all our various hymnals and supplements. What I found was that the hymns in the blue *Hymnal 1982* are a mix of imagery of things like the Second Coming and the end of the world with imagery of the first coming of baby Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem. But they skew towards baby Jesus, and especially so for hymns composed in the mid-twentieth century and later, in the relatively prosperous times after World War II.

That was true for most of the other Episcopal hymnals too, with one exception: *Lift Every Voice*, a volume of African-American hymnody that was published in the 1990s in an effort to bring more of the richness of the Black musical tradition to a more front-and-center place in our denomination's life. And almost every single song in the Advent section of *Lift Every Voice* is not about baby Jesus at all but saturated in the fierce urgency of the Second Coming. "I want to be ready." "Better be ready." "Soon and very soon, we are going to see the King."

Just like for those first generations of Christians in the Roman Empire, so for those nineteenth-century Black Christians in the slavery era who gave birth to so much of this music, the end of the world wasn't something to be shied away from but something to welcome.

And the classic spirituals of the African-American tradition often have more than one meaning. They're about the end times, but also very much about these times. Sometimes singers would encode hidden messages about escape and freedom in the lyrics of songs that could also be explained as just being about scripture. "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land, tell old Pharaoh to let my people go," wasn't just about Moses but also about those agents of the Underground Railroad like Harriet Tubman who stole down into "Egypt" to set God's people free. "Steal away to Jesus" wasn't just about taking time for personal prayer but also about holding out the hope for escape.

That sense of double meaning—or maybe not so much double meaning as superimposing, the idea that the otherworldly and the this-worldly can't be separated but are right on top of each other—that's in Jesus's words today too. "This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place," he says. And in a this-worldly sense that's not true. Jesus' first generation of followers all died, and so have generations upon generations since, and the Son of Man has not yet returned.

Then again, Jesus may have been talking about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, a historical event which did very much take place during their lifetimes. It's hard to tell, as Jesus switches back and forth from talking about dramatic crisis on a human scale to talking about the return of the Son of Man and the ushering in of the reign of God, and from warning his followers not to be fooled into thinking that wars or disasters mean the end is at hand, to telling them to be on the lookout and watch for the signs.

What's clear is that following Jesus means getting ready; being alert; keeping watch. Stay awake, says Jesus. Be on your guard. Pray for strength to endure. And also, take hope. Lift up your heads. Your redemption is near.

Today is the beginning of Advent. This is a season of expectation. Of self-examination. Of repenting what we need to repent and letting go of what hinders us. And it's also a season of hope and joy, fierce joy, joy that looks straight into the terrors and traumas of our lives and says: lift up your heads; your Savior is at hand. It's often said that Advent is about preparation for Christmas, and of course that's true. But Advent is about so much more than that. We can't really prepare for the birth of Jesus. It's already happened. We can't pretend ourselves back 2000 years in time any more than we can go back and prepare for the Tubbs fire or September 11 or any other event that's passed into history. What we can do of course is to prepare ourselves once again to celebrate the commemoration of that event at Christmas. Christmas 2024 is different from any other Christmas that has ever happened. What can we do today to help ourselves arrive at December 25th, 2024 with open hearts and in right relationship with our neighbors?

And we can also prepare ourselves for what really is still yet to come, that glorious climax to history that Jesus talks about today. Not fooling ourselves that we know what it could possibly be like or when it will arrive, but simply putting our faith in the fact that God is in charge of the whole human story as well as the story of all creation beyond humanity, that God's purpose is to set the world to right and that nothing can ultimately thwart God's purpose, and that we with everyone else God has created will one day stand with everything we have ever been and done exposed to ourselves and to God's infinite justice coupled with infinite love.

How do we approach that day? Not by trying to save ourselves by our own good deeds or best efforts, but by putting our trust in God's grace as we have come to know it through Jesus, and then by living in the light of that grace: simply, mercifully, following the footsteps of the Son of Man.