

The World is About to Turn to the Promise of Peace

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Ravensworth Baptist Church
December 1, 2019
Matthew 24:36–44, Isaiah 2:1–5

Happy Advent, everyone!

We knew this Sunday was coming, but it still feels like it snuck up a bit on us. We've climbed out of our Thanksgiving sweatpants, maybe some of us have started putting up Christmas decorations, and now, we face a shorter season between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Advent is the beginning of our church year. We begin our new church year, our new church calendar with a season that is all about preparation, of waiting, of hoping for Christ to come again. A lot of our attention is focused on the squishy baby Jesus who we will celebrate on December 25. But the earliest Jesus followers were concerned with when the resurrected Christ would make his next appearance. They had lived with squishy baby Jesus turned wilderness wanderer and prophet-teacher, turned crucified one, all the way to resurrected and ascended one. And they wanted to know when he was coming back.

Advent is about waiting for Jesus to come on the scene again—come back and begin the age where all things will be new. We live in this in between, between Jesus' birth and when we believe all of creation will be made new again. Advent is a mixture of waiting for the fullness of time in Jesus, waiting for his upcoming birth, and recognizing our role in the midst of all of it.

We are committed to paying attention to the world as it is because we know the possibilities of how the world could be.

Advent requires some patience. It requires some hope. That's part of why we do it together—no one's trying to do this on their own. And it's hard to consider all of these things and hold it all in tension when we look around and wonder—what in the world is going on in our world?

Our Advent theme is "The World is About to Turn." And each week we'll look at a gospel passage about the world turning or being called to turn toward the promise of peace, hope, joy, and love, as we light candles with the same themes. And as Marshall kicked us off this week, we'll hear from a "Worship Witness" about what they think it means that the world might be about to turn. What does this advent belief that we're in between mean to us right now?

I came across a piece written by Sarah Bessey this week, entitled, "Does Advent Even Matter When the World is on Fire?" It made me laugh because I wish I had named the sermon. It was such a blunt truth in the form of a question and it absolutely describes how I think so many of us feel.

She writes, "How do we celebrate or "get cozy" or turn towards Christmas when our hearts are broken by Syria's refugees, by Hong Kong's protests, by Brexit, by the U.S.A. impeachment proceedings and detention camps, by broken treaties, by one another?"

When, in response to every crisis, our communities seem splintered and divided even in how to bind up each other's wounds and careless words are flung like rocks at our own glass houses? When perhaps we are lonely or bored or tired or sick or broke or afraid? When we are grieving and sad?

In these days, celebration can seem callous and uncaring, if not outright impossible.

But here's the thing: we enter into Advent precisely *because* we are paying attention.

It's *because everything hurts that we prepare for Advent.* It's because we have stood in hospital rooms and gravesides, empty churches and quiet bedrooms that we resolutely lay out candles and matches.

We don't get to have hope without having grief. Hope dares to admit that not everything is as it should be, and so if we want to be hopeful, first we have to grieve. First we have to see that something is broken and there is a reason for why we need hope to begin with.

Advent matters, because it's our way of keeping our eyes and our hearts and our arms all wide open even in the midst of our grief and longing.

The weary world is still waiting in so many ways, in so many hearts, in so many places, for the fullness of the Kin-dom of God to come. Advent is for the ones who know longing."¹

I'll share the link this week because her full piece is excellent and it makes me think of some ongoing conversations in Tuesday Morning Bible Study and the Philipians class.

We know longing. We have experienced longing because have been paying attention to the pain in the world AND the love of God in the world. We know what the promise of peace could be.

You might have winced as you first heard the passage from Matthew today. It's one of those ones that's been so co-opted by culture and novels and movies that it's almost easier to just not listen to it. It's not very sweet. But it's very Jesus.

Matthew is our gospel for this new year, so we'll be spending a lot of time with the first gospel in our Bible.

A brief intro of Matthew—thought to have been written around 85-90, after the destruction of the Temple and Matthew's audience was struggling. At least some of them had been around with Jesus and had known the disciples. And they thought Jesus was coming back right away to save them from the Roman Empire. In Jerusalem, Matthew was writing for folks who were Jewish and followers of Jesus on the way.

Throughout his gospel, you'll hear a lot of quoting from the prophets and you'll read that Jesus is compared to Abraham, Moses, the great patriarchs of the faith. But Jesus is bringing about something new in Matthew—there are two ages according to Matthew, the current present evil age and then the second age to come when all things will be made

¹ Sarah Bessey, "[Does Advent Even Matter When the World is on Fire?](#)" November 24, 2019.

new.² Matthew writes out these stark contrasts—the beatitudes, the sheep and the goats, the clean and the unclean. His divisions are everywhere. He’s passionate about righteousness—right living based in justice.

We begin Advent with a passage near the end of Matthew, the 24th chapter. It’s part of Matthew’s little apocalypse, his little revealing.

Jesus was busy sharing with the disciples after he’d already foretold the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. As you can imagine, they had some questions.

“But Jesus doesn’t just talk about the Temple. He leapfrogs to talk about the end of the cosmos, the end of history...as we know it. With figurative, apocalyptic, and mythological imagery, the Evangelists present Jesus as interpreting the meaning of Jesus’ return.”³ Again, Matthew is showing us the great divide and he references one of those patriarchs—Noah.

Look at what he says about Noah—“Matthew’s schema is the complete reversal of what we have seen portrayed about this passage. As the Great Flood took away the unfaithful and left behind the faithful, so too will be the coming of the son of man. Two will be in a field. The unfaithful one will be taken away, and the faithful will remain. Two will be working in a mill: the unfaithful one will be taken away and the faithful one will be left behind.”

The faithful one will be left behind—just like Noah was the one left behind. Uh oh. I think some bumper stickers need to be updated.

Ok, so this is a reversal of understanding, but it still says that someone’s being taken away. In Matthew’s day, they were used to the authorities coming to take people away. In fact, any people living in oppression know that authorities come in the middle of the night and just grab people. We’ve all heard the stories. Some of us have lived them.

Matthew’s Jesus was speaking as he liked to do--metaphorically! No one is going to be snatched—faithful or unfaithful. It’s a way for the people to think about staying alert. Pay attention to what is happening around them.

Are Jesus followers ones making sure the field conditions are safe and there are appropriate pay and bathroom breaks for the farmworkers?

Are Jesus followers looking into the living wage for the mill workers and considering what it means to care for each other’s health as they breathe in the genetically modified grain residue?

We have already been transformed by the Christ-moment, and we are invited to participate in the transformation of the world that is still in process.

Are Jesus followers working in the places where equality and justice have not yet been found?

² Ronald J. Allen, “Commentary on Matthew 24:35-44.” *Working Preacher*, 2016.

³ O. Wesley Allen, “Commentary on Matthew 24:36-44.” *Working Preacher*, November 24, 2019.

Are Jesus followers paying attention where school children are dying of senseless violence?

Are we watching the world turn in pain as we destroy it as our home?

Are we alert to our neighbors who live in fear of ICE showing up on their doorstep, a literal example of Matthew's fear?

Are we like, Isaiah calls willing to turn our weapons into communal farming tools? To move from violence that takes lives to care that nurtures life?

This is what it means to stay awake. This is what it might mean for the world to turn toward the promise of peace.

Whether it's Advent or not, we're always asking the question of what it means to follow Jesus when it feels like the world is on fire. And so was the church that Matthew was writing to. This is what it means to be alive and to hope.

The promise of peace in the world is not that all things will be smoothed over. The promise of peace during Advent is that we know how to live—we know how to stay alert and work toward the world that is to come.

Today, I'll close this sermon with the words of Madeleine L'Engle, a poet, one of God's gifts to us who can parse through the everyday into the depths of truth. A poem entitled, "First Coming," recognizing that we live in this inbetween and it's always the right time for peace--

First Coming
Madeleine L'Engle

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.

He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

The world is about to turn—stay alert!

Thanks be to God. Amen.