

Advent 1B 2017
Wake Up
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Advent arrests our comfortable lives like a clanging alarm, waking us up. Advent provokes crisis. Everything is not all right. Foundations are trembling even as we speak. Everything that can be shaken will be shaken. Reading the Gospel provocation this week, reminds me of the Call, an 80s band. In 1986, they released their fourth album, Reconciled. It made me think of a soundtrack for the Book of Revelation. In fact, their music sounded like prophets of old, proclaiming the Word of the Lord with the driving intensity of Rock and Roll.

In the song Oklahoma, a tornado rips through town in the middle of the night. Michael Been belts out,

*We were shaking in our beds that night
There were strangers in the streets that night
Preacher cried out hells been raised
The preacher cried out hells been raised*

As the storm thunders across the land, the whole town wakes up to crisis.

*We were shaking in our beds that night
We were shaking in our boots that night
Tornado hit and the roof gave way
Tornado hit and all we could do was pray
How was I to know what I was to think
How was I to know what I was to feel
How am I to say what I can't describe
How an I to face what I cannot hide*

The terror of the moment drives the people to pray, to cry out to God. This album makes me think of an Advent sermon by Alfred Deep delivered in Nazi Germany in 1941. He declares, “That is the first Advent message: before the end, the world will be set quaking. And only where man does not cling inwardly to false security will his eyes be capable of seeing the Ultimate.”¹

Delp’s fiery proclamation in the midst of an oppressive state would lead to his execution at age 37. Just a few weeks before the end of the war, he was hung for high treason. All these years later, his voice still rings out like a clanging alarm, “Wake up!” He declares,

“Perhaps what we modern people need most is to be genuinely shaken, so that where life is grounded, we would feel its stability; and where life is unstable and uncertain, immoral and unprincipled, we would know that, also, and endure it. Perhaps that is the ultimate answer to the question of why God has sent us into this time, why He permits this whirlwind to go over the earth, and why He holds us in such a state of chaos and in hopelessness and in darkness—and

¹ Delp, Alfred. Advent Of The Heart (Kindle Locations 406-407). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

why there is no end in sight. It is because we have stood here on the earth with a totally false and inauthentic sense of security.”²

We continue to walk on unstable and uncertain ground, thinking it is stable, sure and immovable. We must wake up to the realization that our only firm footing is in the way of the Lord.

While we only read part of Mark 13 in today’s Gospel, the entire chapter agitates with warnings of a world falling into calamity. Jesus looks at the glorious Temple, declaring, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” (Mk 13:2)

Even as Jesus speaks, his words carry the echo of a quaking that will not stop until the city lies in ruins. He describes a world in chaos, mother against daughter, brother against brother, nations engaged in a never-ending war: the Eve of Destruction.

Today’s reading begins with the heavens coming apart. The sun and the moon have turned dark. Stars are falling from the heavens. The Son of Man bursts into the world in swirling clouds, fiery light, and great power.

When we read these passages, we might be startled. Wait a minute? Isn’t this Advent? Aren’t we getting ready for Christmas? Songs of holly and jolly fill our cars, homes, and stores. Why are we talking about terror, destruction, calamity, the end of all things?

Advent disrupts our sleep, our comfort with an unrelenting crisis. Everything is not all right. When the disciples heard this word, it would have been unimaginable that everything around them was crumbling. Israel had been waiting on a Messiah to come and deliver them from the grip of Rome. As Jesus speaks, “The disciples do not hear a crusading deliverer but a sounding alarm.”

Within a generation, Jerusalem would be leveled to the ground in a terrifying display of Roman power. A whirlwind swept over the world that seemed so secure and stable and immovable. The city was leveled and the people escaped or were killed. The words of Jesus were fulfilled, and yet, there is a sense that his words continue to point an ultimate fulfillment. If we consider his words in light of the prophets, we will notice a similar pattern.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others declare the Word of the Lord in a specific moment and situation. At the same time, the Word of the Lord continues to resound long after the prophets have died. Some of their prophecies can also point to an ultimate realization, a culmination of all things. There is also a sense in which their words resound in every age.

We can think of Jesus’ words in Mark 13 as being fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem even as they point his ultimate purposes in the end of time. We can also hear how his words can enlighten every age.

Rome ruthlessly destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. One day the instability of Rome would also be exposed. The days of the Roman empire were numbered. The Caesars were not gods. They would die. Some would be killed. The grand power of the empire would crumble. Kingdom after

² Delp, Alfred. *Advent Of The Heart* (Kindle Locations 394-398). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

kingdom, age after age, life after life. All fall under the hand of God. In his height, Hitler's power seemed unshakeable. Those who resisted him like Alfred Delp were killed, but Hitler's power would be utterly, absolutely destroyed. And Delp's words continue to ring out with stunning clarity.

What looks firm and unshakable today, may be passing away. 1 John tells us,

And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 Jn 2:17)

Whatever can be shaken, will be shaken at some point. All this talk of destruction, kingdoms falling, the stars falling from the skies, and the sun and moon turning dark could provoke fear in the listener. Many of us grew in an Evangelical climate of terror at the end of the world. Either terror in what might happen in the culture or in the heavens, or we might also be terrified that the end may come before we have a chance to live life to the fullest.

How do we start this season of anticipation, of hope with a vision of calamity, with stars falling, with everything falling apart? I see at least four images of hope in today's Gospel:

1. His Appearing in the Clouds
2. His Gathering of the People
3. His Promise of Fruitfulness
4. His Sudden Surprise

1. His Appearing in the Clouds

As today's reading opens, we are suddenly immersed in a terrifying crisis: tribulation, sun and moon turned dark, stars falling from the skies. Right in the middle of this cataclysm, the Son of Man appears in great power. During Advent, we look with hope for the coming of the Son. We anticipate his return in great power and glory. He has not forsaken us, and ultimately his purposes in this world will prevail. The journey of Advent begins with this hope.

We move toward this hope. We live toward this hope, trusting that all our acts of love and kindness and justice are not meaningless but will be completed in the coming of Christ.

Hope for his eventual return, gives us courage to act justly, love mercy and live humbly before our God. This image of Jesus appearing in power and glory in the midst of a terrifying event, also reinforces an image throughout Scripture that God does not abandon his people in darkness. Our Psalm today is rooted in that very hope. The people of God are thrust into a crisis, into the wilderness, into exile, and yet, they cry out in hope because they believe God will hear them.

They pray,

Restore us, O God;

let your face shine, that we may be saved!

This makes me think of a little meditation by Kosuke Koyama. In his book, *Three Mile God*. He suggests that crisis or the wilderness is a gift from God. It is in a sense God's classroom. He writes about the children of Israel being led into the wilderness. He says,

*"The wilderness is an open space in all directions. It is a place full of possibilities. The mind can stretch out or plunge into deep meditation in the wilderness. But at the same time this open space is a dangerous, desolate place inhabited by demons and evil spirits. It is a space not cultivate-not civilized. The wilderness is full of promise and full of danger."*³

The path forward looks dark, and unknown, and dangerous. What happens when the vision I had about life, the way I thought things were going to play out didn't play out. Now I'm suddenly immersed in darkness. I have no idea of the way forward. This happens again and again in all of our lives. What Jesus is saying in this passage today is that He is present. He is present at the end of all things, he comes back, and all of the things will be rolled up into God's purposes. He is also present now. That God who comes in the clouds, fire and power, He's present now. We see that in the story of Elijah, crying out to God on a mountain. We see power, glory, earthquake, wind, fire, but then Scripture says that the presence of the Lord is in the still small voice, or it might be translated, "The shuddering silence." He's present in the absolute stillness.

It is here. In this place of desperation. Stripped of all the illusions of stability where we face our desperate need for God's grace, God's Word. Think of the sun and moon as any lights that light our way beside the light of Christ. Every light is darkened. The only way forward is to trust that He is present and he can lead us through the valley of the shadow of death and into the way of His light.

Crisis and calamity can be his gift of opening our ears and our eyes to His presence, His power, His glory, and ultimately His unfailing love. In Advent, we meditate on a world gone wrong, knowing that He is present in this crisis and leading us into the fullness of His love.

2. Gathering His People

In our passage today, he sends out the angels and gathers his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (Mk 13:27). This image of gathering his people from the four winds is an image of restoration. In Ezekiel 5, the people are blown into the four winds, which means the destruction of Jerusalem and the annihilation of the people of God. Dispersed into exile, they cease to be a people. But God hasn't forgotten them. Though they are no longer a people, he will make them a people again.

In Ezekiel 37, the Lord tells Ezekiel to speak to the dry bones that they might live. We see a dramatic resurrection of bones coming together and skin coming on bones, and a people rising. But there is still no breath in them. Then the Lord says, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." (Eze 37:9-10).

³ Koyama, Kosuke. *Three Mile an Hour God*. SCM Press LTD., 1979 (p. 4).

When Jesus speaks of sending out angels to the four winds, he is capturing this image of restoration. The life of God being breathed afresh into his people.

3. His Promise of Fruitfulness

What's the next image we read in the gospel? The fig tree is coming to life and bearing fruit. Many of the trees in the region were evergreen, but the fig tree appears to die in offseason. It dries up, the leaves turn brown, and it looks dead. But then in late spring, the tree suddenly bursts into life. New leaves appear and it comes back to life. Jesus says that this is a sign that summer is near.

If we think of the angels gathering God's people from the four winds and the fig tree coming to life, we see a picture of resurrection. An ultimate resurrection of God's people but also new life in each generation. Again and again throughout history, the church has appeared on the verge of death, but God breathes new life into His people and sudden fruitfulness reveals the promise of His coming and His purposes in this world.

4. His Sudden Surprise

Lastly, we come to this sudden appearing of the Lord. Jesus says, "stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake." (Mk 13:35–37)

Advent reminds us that in the midst of this darkened world and in the midst of our own seasons of crisis, wilderness, and loss, we are not forsaken. He is coming. Don't lose heart. Don't grow weary in well-doing.

Keep your eyes open and your heart full of hope. Though he made lead the church into the wilderness and though you may experience your own seasons of darkness and struggle, he is present in power and glory. Watch, look, listen. For suddenly, he can breath upon you and upon his church and bring new life, new fruitfulness, and reveal a glimpse of the glory that is to come when He returns and leads all creation into glory.

So let us watch and wait in hope. No matter what we see or experience in the pains and troubles of life. Let us trust in the faithfulness of God who come and who will make us fruitful and who will raise us up in His life.