

Advent 1 2021
November 28
Rev. Isaac Bradshaw
Luke 21:25-33

Love is Gathering

Some of you may never have done the math, but I'm the same age as MTV. 40. We're nearing middle age. Or in it, if I am honest with myself.

We started out with Reagan and Thatcher and now we have Joe and Boris. These 40 years that have seen Challenger Disaster, fall of the Berlin Wall, the Persian Gulf War, peace in Northern Ireland, Impeachment, 9/11, another Persian Gulf War, and another Impeachment, and... another Impeachment. And through it all, I had my MTV. That little Kabel typeface in the lower left corner, a visual radio.

It was and is, the soundtrack of the Millennials. We've never been without it. And it carries with it the imprints of my generation. We wanted to change the world and Rocked the Vote. We ran headlong into reality and our inability to change the world with Gideon Yago's reporting on the Iraq War in 2004. And there was the music. The Cranberries. Sean Combs. U2. Metallica. Blind Melon. We got to see our artists in 3 and half minute miniconcerts, with all the whizz-bang effects they could muster. An acoustic set from Nirvana. Or quietly. Unplugged.

But perhaps no artist captured the Zeitgeist of MTV better than that band of Athens, Georgia, REM and their mastery of the music video. Ironically, they hated music videos. They thought they were cheesy. People obviously lip syncing to pre-recorded music? Bah. Not for them.

So they did something different. Tell a story, they said. Capture the mood of the song. Show, don't tell, the band said. And so REM's video for "Losing My Religion" has vignettes, snapshots of a story. An angel falls to earth from heaven. Old men declare this a miracle; a man with wings! Younger men, pound industrial hammers on anvils as a red flag fabric flaps both ominous and courageous in the background, constructing a set of metal wings and harness as if to say... This miracle isn't really a miracle. God came to earth... And we built a better one.

We like to think that Advent is primarily about waiting on Christmas. In our common mind, it sits as a kind of a prequel. We fight the urge to start singing Christmas songs, and when we do wreaths and purple, it all feels preemptively Christmasy.

And that's true, to a certain extent. Our readings point us to an expectation that something is coming. A king. Hence all the purple. Or a judge, set to find in our favor and release us from bondage.

But we make a serious error if we think that this points exclusively and directly to Christmas. Because what Advent is preparing us for is the end of the world.

I want to pause here because there's far too much speculation about what Scripture says about the end times, and we all know the vulgar expressions of this. 88 Reasons why Jesus Will come back in 1988, which, as the title may suggest, has not aged particularly well. The Late Great Planet Earth. Left Behind. My personal favorite is the nearly 50-foot-long chart of terrible events to come I once saw on a preaching show, in minute detail describing everything terrible that was going to happen when the end of the world happens. Forgive me for being uncharitable but it reminded me of a deranged TV weatherman. And just so I can't be accused of picking on the

Baptists... Plenty of Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other Christians have fallen into the long grass on thinking about the end of the world. And all of it has the feeling of... You guessed it, a deranged TV weatherman.

Anglicanism has resisted these kinds of speculation, but even then we have to resist the temptation to start reading Advent through the veil of the news media of our choice. But to do so is, frankly a bit like the vignettes and tableaux of *Losing My Religion*. We've been given a clear warning, we've been given a judge that has already come to earth... But we'd rather be building those angel wings out iron and steel, constructing a god of our own design. No amount of speculation and fundamentalist occultism, no deranged weathermen telecasting about the future should detract us.

We should read this in both directions, as warning and as an encouragement. When the waves crash, and the sea roils... When there are signs in the sun and stars, when the nations feel foreboding... When everything says "CHAOS!" What does Jesus say? "Straighten up. Look up. Your redemption draws near!"

There was another music video on MTV that, while not quite as groundbreaking as REM's, that sticks in my mind. The song "The World I Know" by another Georgia band, Collective Soul, gives us a video of a businessman in the city. The colors are dark, black, blue and purple. He rides a bus. He reads a newspaper. He walks past a mad prophet preaching on a soapbox. He starts crying. He climbs a fire escape to the top of a building. He takes off his shoes and jacket and steps to the roof's edge, and opens his arms out and begins to lean forward. The singer, with long hair and a beard, just a touch of '90s grunge Jesus about him, looks on, singing "I walk upon high, and a step to the edge, to see my world below..." A fade to white...

It's easy to see our lives and the interactions with others as nothing more than a 50-foot long chart of terrible events. And for some of you, that's exactly what life has given you. I look at my students and I know, with the dark certainty that only being in public education can give you... That some of my kiddos will die before I do. Some of them already have. I know some of them will go to jail. I know some of them will have divorces. Some of them will be deported away from family and friends and the only place they've ever lived. Some of them will go through drug addiction or experience it in the family. Some of them will have the yoke of poverty placed on their necks by a system that values only what can be given a price. And my heart breaks. It's a world where God has come to earth, only to be rejected and sent packing, preferring our own god and spirit fashioned from our own hands, hammered into existence with blood, iron, and steel, forged from the destruction of God's creation.

But that fade to white isn't the end of the video. A dove lands on his arm. He catches himself, and the world snaps back into full color. He pulls bread out of his jacket and shares it with the dove. And the ants. He takes a wad of cash out of his pocket and throws it to street below. And as the song says...

"And I laugh at myself while the tears roll down
'Cause it's the world I know..."

Remarkable imagery for a secular music station. A remarkable distillation of this Gospel. You pick the world you know. You pick the world you get to live in. The world where death has no

meaning, where people are simply wiped from existence because of war or illness or poverty... Or the world where the Holy Spirit gives you the fullness of life. Where you share bread with the Spirit and throw resources to those in need. Which world do you put your faith in? Which world do you know?

Here is Gospel. Our King is coming to do justice. To live among us without temple or veil. To restore all of Creation, and take every tear and take every heartbreak, the false industrialized wings of steel and iron, and toss them to the bottom of that pit with death and Satan all those who follow them. That's the Advent. That's the appearing that is foretold here. And it starts with a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Amen