

Advent's Portents!—Cosmic Discontents? Or Heaven Sent!

Isaiah 64:1-9 Mark 13:24-37

Advent and Christmas seem like trains that are headed in opposite directions!

Christmas is a baby being born in a manger!

Angels singing over a remote village

silent with wheat blowing in the wind

Wise kings and peasant parents alike—traveling!

Traveling! Traveling!

Under a single sky crossing lodestar.

A holy donkey! Sacred sheep! Holy cow!

Signal LOVE being birthed into a needy world now.

Christmas! A cosmic EXPLOSION of wonder and joy!PAUSE.....

Advent is the total, complete opposite!

If we take the Message of Mark seriously, Advent is a runaway coal train!

It's a nightmare you don't want to have!

Advent begins with weird, frightening events!

That renders you a nervous wreck!

You don't want to be around to see this.

Portents in the sky!

The sun goes dark!

It's a cosmic blackout!

Not good!

The moon vanishes from sight.

Stars begin to fall!

The heavens start to vibrate!

A Biblical tsunami rolls through the immense region of the seas!

It's downright dreadful!

Advent and Christmas are both holy times!

But—Wow, are they different kinds of holy time!

If Christmas could be said to mark a new beautiful beginning!—

A story that makes your soul want to sing!—

Advent begins with the end of everything!

It's a cosmic panic attack!

It's the invasion of the Big Dread!

All your fears —ones you were familiar with and fears you never even imagined—are front and center, dug into every corner of your mental space!

A pandemic rages!

The climate is changing.

Hunger is spreading!

Fear is contagious.

Hope wavers on a vibrating tightrope.

Sophia Sanchez, age 9 and stuck in perpetual Zoom school, is crying a lot lately.

Her mother and sister rush in and ask what went wrong.

Sophia cannot really answer.

She's too upset!

She's wondering whether she'll ever learn new things again!

She fears she will fail fourth grade.

More than anything, Sophia is missing her friends.

She hasn't seen a single friend since March, when she was in third grade.

"So I just get really angry and frustrated," she said. "I cry."

Here is Mark's Advent scrolling down your phone.

These kinds of things do not feel at all good!

And The message of the church!—

The message of Jesus' gospel in these first Sunday of Advent lections—is —that our deepest fears are completely real.

Nevertheless, if we face them fearlessly and trust in God's love,

A way will show itself.

So Be alert.

Be on guard!

Wake up!

For your liberation is drawing near!

God has something wonderful to show you.

But what?

Sure, we make a commitment to believe that there is a way out of this mess, but—where is it? And when will it show itself? (ring gong)

Jesus offers a parable.

Now—a parable may not seem especially decisive in the face of disaster.

But let's give Jesus a—"Listen up!"

Essentially Jesus says: Okay, you have seen one dreadful thing after another.

And I know you feel like your backs are against the wall all the time.

If you are unemployed or underemployed, small business teetering or closed, sick with Covid, homeless, can't go to school, an immigrant without documents, you've lost loved ones—some or all of your world is falling apart—

Take a moment.....Breathe.

Breathe in.

Breathe out!

Turn!

Look at something else!

As a matter of fact—Look at this fig tree!

I know, it appears that there is no life at all in this fig tree.

The branches of this fig tree are bare.

Nothing green in sight.

However, says Jesus, look closer!

As C.S. Lewis would say, "Look deeper in the closet."

Sap is flowing.

Buds are beginning to sprout.

The tree is coming alive again.

In other words, at the moment when the end of everything seems to be relentlessly unfolding—

—And you are face to face with your fears and your middle of the night dreadfulness

—and the most unsettling, existential anxiety you can possibly face—

The story is not over yet!

Keep walking through the story....pause

I want to tell you a real life Advent story that some people are walking through right now.

A little boy is charging along the highway!

His red plastic shoes are glowing in the twilight.

The suitcase on wheels he is pulling weighs almost as much as he does.

A truck throttles by, threatening to blow him off his feet.

But Sebastián Ventura, who at just 6 has already taken on the role of family cheerleader, urges his family on.

“To Venezuela!” he shouts.

His mother, Jessika Ventura, four months pregnant, widowed at 22 when criminals killed her husband, rushes to keep up.

There are hundreds of people on the highway tonight!

All Venezuelans who fled their country’s collapse before the pandemic and found refuge in Colombia.

Now, after losing her job and works of art she loved making as a florist when the economic crash followed the virus into Bogota, Columbia, they are trying desperately to get back home to Venezuela, where at least they can rely on family. It’s 600 miles! That’s like walking from Kansas City to Denver!

Yes, we all know that the global health crisis wrought by the coronavirus has played out most visibly in hospitals and cemeteries, its devastating toll clocked in cases and deaths, its aftermath tracked in lost work and shuttered businesses.

But a second, less visible aspect of the catastrophe has unfolded on the world’s highways, as millions of migrants — Afghans, Ethiopians, Nicaraguans, Ukrainians and others — have lost work in their adopted countries and headed home.

Stranded migrants!

After weeks and weeks of walking, the family finally gets back to Venezuela.

There, Jessika quickly learns that the government has been using its repressive security apparatus to try to control the virus.

In the border town of San Antonio del Táchira, officials corral Jessika and her family into a detention center.

They are given coronavirus tests and cots in a tent with 600 others.

For days, they sleep under military guard.

Each morning, 6 year old Sebastián's concern is "What are we going to eat today, Mama?"

Meal lines are long.

There is never enough food.

There are no forks or knives, so they feed themselves with their identity cards, cutting with the sharp side, spooning with the flat side.

Sebastián's anxiety hits a fever pitch.

He asks his mother constantly where they will live, what they will eat and when he can return to his school classroom.

Jessika begins to replay the events of the past few months.

All that walking, all those days in the rain, the cold—had amounted to nothing.

Venezuela is in free fall.

Jessika is now eight-and-a-half months pregnant.

She calls her mother to tell her she is going to walk the 600 miles back to Bogotá.

"With that belly?" her mother replies.

"I came like this," Jessika responds, "and I'll return like this."

The family begin the long walk back to Bogota.

Along the way, Jessika give birth to her baby. He's only 5 pounds, but he's healthy.

Soon a bus driver, seeing the infant in Jessika's arms, gives them a ride.

Six months after leaving Bogotá, Jessika and Sebastián step off a bus at the city's Salitre terminal.

Sebastián's shoes are worn nearly through their plastic soles.

But the six year old bounces through the bus terminal, electrified by their return.

Colombia's economy has begun to reopen.

In the morning, they'll message the florist, and Jessika will ask for her job back.

But that evening, with nowhere else to go—

they curl up to sleep under a footbridge!

Inches from an eight-lane highway!

Homeless for one more night!

Waiting for hope, like the moon, to rise.... (ring gong)

"But in those days, after that suffering.....

They will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds'

with great power and glory....

Advent is about awakening!

Advent is about awakening to the claims of Christ on your life!

Feed the hungry!

Clothe the naked!

Visit the sick!

Bless the persecuted!

Join in liberating the oppressed and the poor!

Commit to non-violent resistance to evil.

Lift the burden of judgment from people living
under the threat of unjust laws cruel culture and dated policies.

In Jesus' day, a woman threatened with being stoned for adultery.

In our day, Black transgender women, their lives constantly threatened.

In Jesus' day, a thief being crucified.

In our day, an undocumented immigrant who's worked
and raised a family here for 25 years and still is threatened
with being deported.

I will close with this thought.

If the three wise kings traveled from as far as scholar surmise—somewhere
in modern day Iran, they had already left when what we call Advent began.

They were on their way!

They had no real idea where they were going.

But they went anyway.

I don't think a lot of us know where we are going today in multiple
dimensions of our daily lives.

But if you head toward the manger

And awaken to the claims of Christ!

Your journey will be one that you will enjoy!

And God will enjoy your lively, love-ignited joy!

Amen.

Rev. Scott Myers

First Sunday of Advent

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Westport Presbyterian Church, Kansas City, Missouri