

The Sunday Missive December 3, 2023
The First Sunday in Advent

Hymn 57 Lo! He comes with clouds descending

Lo! he comes with clouds descending, once for our salvation slain;
Thousand, thousand saints attending swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ the Lord returns to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him, pierced, and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.

Yea, amen! let all adore thee, high on thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the power and glory; claim the kingdom for thine own:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Thou shalt reign, and thou alone.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w98-VuKi-4Q>

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Leader: Gracious God, you have created a universe of light, forgive us when we return to darkness.

People: *Lord have mercy upon us.*

Leader: Lord Christ, you are the light of the world: cleanse and heal our blinded sight.

People: *Christ have mercy upon us.*

Leader: Holy Spirit, you shine the light of forgiveness into our hearts: renew us in faith and love.

People: *Lord have mercy upon us.*

Hymn 56

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high, who orderest all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show, and teach us in her ways to go.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcllZpnZPgo>

The Collect of the Day

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Psalm 80

Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock* ***Shine forth, you who are enthroned upon the cherubim.***

In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh* ***Stir up your strength and come to our assistance.***

Restore us, O Lord of hosts* ***Show the light of your face, and we shall be saved.***

O Lord God how long will you be angered* ***Despite the prayers of your people?***

You have fed them with the bread of tears* ***You have given them bowls of tears to drink.***

You have made us the derision of our neighbors* ***Our enemies laugh us to scorn.***

Restore us, O God of hosts* ***Show the light of your face, and we shall be saved.***

And so will we never turn away from you* ***Give us life, that we may call upon your Name.***

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Lift Every Voice and Sing Hymn 13

My Lord, what a morning,
My Lord, what a morning,
O my Lord, what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall.

You'll hear the trumpet sound,
To wake the nations underground,
Looking to my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall. [Refrain]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t02NL8DVN6E>

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said, “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

What are We Praying For? -- 1 Advent B

In the second century BCE, the Seleucid Emperor Antiochus forbade the practice of all religions except his own. For the Jews, that meant no temple activities of any kind; it was illegal for the people to possess a copy of the Torah Scrolls. The apocalyptic story of Daniel was written down as a response to this threat. Daniel provided a heroic model of how to remain faithful under an oppressive tyranny, in his case, that of the Babylonians, who had laid waste to Jewish civilization four hundred years earlier and carted many of them into exile (Daniel included). Eventually, the Babylonians themselves and all they ruled was taken over by the Seleucids. The ancient story of Daniel’s faithfulness in the face of oppression helped second-century Jews believe that their faith had meaning and purpose in the face of overwhelmingly oppressive conditions.

Three hundred years later, in the first century CE, Mark’s gospel was written down -- around the year 70 -- when Roman rulers had become fed up with Jewish opposition and systematically destroyed Jerusalem and its Jewish culture yet again, leaving the city in utter ruin, its few survivors

scattered. In the portion of Mark's gospel we just heard, Jesus is reported to have predicted the destruction of the temple that would indeed come to pass even before the generation that knew him in person had died out, invoking the same language and imagery as his ancestor Daniel to do so.

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”

As in the time of the Babylonians, as in the time of Antiochus the Seleucid, so too in the face of the Roman apocalypse, there is a Godly attitude to take, a way to behave, a faith to preserve no matter what is going on in the world. Indeed, the same holds true today. Who are we going to try to be despite what others do? The predictions of destruction and portents of divine appearance that run through apocalyptic literature function not as prophecies about future events so much as descriptive instructions about how to be in the present. As Christopher Hutson has noted, “It turns out the enemy is not any one empire; all political and economic powers are liable to be coopted by Satan. They seek their own worldly agendas at the expense of ordinary people and the planet. These powers try to lull us to sleep or incite us to urgency by reassuring us that they have our best interests at heart. They play on our fears, our prejudices and self-interests so we do not notice their demonic behaviors; beware!”

What are the signs for which we might look? What are the ways we might be said to be dozing off? It seems like this time of year, we get less sleep than ever – it's dark by mid-afternoon, and it's still dark when we get up for work. End of year accounting, favorite traditions, recognitions, festivities, activities, shopping, it all involves energetic wakefulness, not negligent torpor. The question for Advent is: are we looking forward to and preparing for the arrival of God, who has left us in charge of the shop here, or are we just trying to get ready for Christmas? When Jesus comes, we may not be caught napping, but will we be caught shopping?

Looking at and listening to our own inner voices can give us clues about our spiritual wakefulness in the face of today's sleep- or frenzy-inducing demons: excessive consumption, self-centeredness, isolationism, xenophobia and scapegoating, to name a few.

Are we praying, with the prophet Isaiah for God to “come among us, to tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and causes water to boil?” Do we look for ways to acknowledge: “O Lord, we are the clay, and you are our

potter; we are all the work of your hand. We are all your people?" Are we eager, as Donna Henes has urged, to "remember that we are part of the vastly diverse and potentially functional family of humanity -- relatives, kin, clan, mishpocheh; loving cousins to all the inhabitants of the Universe?"

Or do our prayers more closely resemble the effort to stay aloof and protected from God's light and influence that Elizabeth Stoddard reveals in her poem, *Closed*?

"Who knows the miracle that brings the morn?
Still in my house I linger, though the night—
The night that hides me from myself is gone.
Light robes the world, but strips me bare again.

Rise, morning, rise, for those believing souls
Who seek completion in day's garish light.
My casement I will close, keep shut my door,
Till day and night are only dreams to me."

Psalm #80, which we said together today, is full of verbs, action words for God's attention, that is: prayers. As we move through Advent together, we can hold in our hearts the balance between times of chaos and confusion and times of peace and assurance; times of yore or present when other powers seem to prevail, and times up yonder when all will be just and perfect. Each moment affords each one of us the opportunity to say:

"Come; Give ear; Shine forth; Stir up; Restore; Turn again; Let your face shine; Look down; See; Have regard; Give life."

In a real sense, the so-called "end times" have always been and will always be, as long as we can think on the reality of God's presence in Christ. From the fig tree learn its lesson: its branch is tender; its leaves are sprouting; summer is near; you know that God is near, at the very gates. This generation will not pass away until all has taken place.

A wise person once said, "The deeper your prayers echo in your own consciousness, the more audible they are to God." Listening observation of our prayers will tell us whether or not we really want the heavens to open up, whether or not we really want the hour and day to come wherein all things are made new, all Creation is equally honored and God made flesh makes sense. This Advent, we can ask ourselves: What are we praying for?

What are the circumstances we hope will prevail after the present apocalypse? What are we willing to say, to do and to be to further those ends?

Lift Every Voice and Sing Hymn 18 -- Swing low, sweet chariot

Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see coming for to carry me home.
A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do, coming for to carry me home.
Tell all my friends I'm coming too, coming for to carry me home.

I'm sometimes up and sometimes down, coming for to carry me home.
But still my soul feels heavenly bound, coming for to carry me home.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljup8cIRzIk>

Hymn 61 "Sleepers wake!" A voice astounds us

"Sleepers, wake!" A voice astounds us,
The shout of rampart-guards surrounds us:
"Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"
Midnight's peace their cry has broken,
Their urgent summons clearly spoken:
"The time has come, O maidens wise!
Rise up, and give us light; the Bridegroom is in sight. Alleluia!
Your lamps prepare and hasten there,
That you the wedding feast may share."

Zion hears the watchman singing;
Her heart with joyful hope is springing,
She wakes and hurries through the night.
Forth he comes, her bridegroom glorious
In strength of grace, in truth victorious:
Her star is risen, her light grows bright.
Now come, most worthy Lord, God's Son, Incarnate Word, Alleluia!
We follow all and heed your call
To come into the banquet hall.

Lamb of God, the heavens adore you; let saints and angels sing before you,
As harps and cymbals swell the sound.

Twelve great pearls, the city's portals:
Through them we stream to join the immortals
As we with joy your throne surround.
No eye has known the sight; no ear heard such delight: Alleluia!
Therefore we sing to greet our King; forever let our praises ring.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfoFHKFCC60>

The Quietest Protest

Some friends and I, we
got together, talked
about the world, and our hearts
fell like stones through mud
and we began to cry.
“I thought something like this
might happen,” said one. She
pulled small white plastic funnels
from her purse and handed
one to each of us, then
rummaged again, and found
a number of small heavy glass
bottles, Victorian apothecary,
covered with raised lettering
we did not trouble to read, old medicines
maybe, and she showed us what to do.
We kept thinking
the world and weeping and now we had a way
to collect our tears. We filled them all, and then
she found a few more, and we filled those too.

The next day, before dawn, that one
friend, wrapped in a wool coat, walked
around to the state house, the church
the college, the bank, the very road, the park
and in each place, took a pale green or blue vial,
unstoppered it, and emptied
our salt water into the ground.

Rita Powell