

“Keeping Watch for God”
Advent 1B
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A few years ago I stumbled across a website called raptureready.com. The site is like the Dow Jones Industrial Average for end of time activity, according to its author. The index is a kind of prophetic speedometer—the higher the number the faster the author believes we are moving towards the end times, which according to some will surely begin with the “rapture” of all righteous believers from the face of the earth. In case you were wondering what the internet end-times watchers have to say about our 2020 status, we are currently scoring at a high 181 points according to the index—well above the 160– point mark, which is the threshold for when Christians need to “fasten their seat belts” because of all that is happening in the world. The index quantifies events like wars, famine, disasters, global turmoil, false prophets, interest rates, unemployment, and plagues to name a few—to reach its current number. And you should know that the category of plagues has currently been maxed out by the coronavirus pandemic! But, I’ll bet most of us don’t need a rapture ready index to know that there’s a lot going on in our lives and our world, and we could use some help!

The Rapture Ready Index is just one of hundreds of sites promising to give Christians more information about when Jesus is coming again, and there is no shortage of such resources. In practically every generation, some believers have reached the conclusion that Christ’s return was imminent. We, too, find ourselves in the long line of Christians who have wrestled with how to live in the now with the hope of what will be—and where God is in the midst of all that.

Those who assigned the lectionary texts for today seem to have been following the advice of movie director Cecil B. De Mille: “Start with an earthquake, then build to a climax.” On this first Sunday of Advent, we do not begin with a baby in the manger and the first coming of the Messiah, but with a cosmic focus and images of the second coming of Jesus. This passage from Mark is apocalyptic. And we should remember: the intent of apocalyptic literature in general and of this passage specifically, is not so much to prepare for the end of time or to ensure we are “rapture ready.” No, the intent is to bring hope to desperate people and to focus expectations on the revelation of God in the here and now.

Advent is a time for hope. And Advent is a time for telling the truth—about our weariness and our anxieties and also about God’s relentless love for all the world. Today’s gospel pulls back the curtain on false hopes and realities in order to reveal God’s commitment to enter into and redeem our lives and world.¹ Mark’s Jesus wants to reassure his disciples that despite the difficulty of their current circumstances, justice is coming. The disciples’ job is to be vigilant, to be on watch for God, even when they feel helpless. Because God remains at work in the world. Because God is on the loose in the world!

Mark’s gospel begins and ends with the idea that the power of God is on the loose in the world. Of all the ways Mark could have started telling his story, he doesn’t begin with birth narratives or angelic announcements as in Luke, or lengthy genealogies as in Matthew, or theological poetics as in John. Mark’s gospel begins with the long-awaited Messiah, the beloved Son of God, being empowered to overcome evil and proclaim the reign of God. The heavens are torn open at Jesus’ baptism, and the Spirit descends upon him. The power of God is on the loose in the world.

And at the end of the Mark’s gospel, in the depiction of Jesus’ death, as Jesus breathed his last, the curtain of temple was torn in two, and in the sixteenth chapter Mary Magdalene and Mary are told, “He has been raised; he is not here...Go, tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you...” God is still on the loose in the world.

In these advent days, let us remember that the power of God is already loose in the world—in the midst of pandemics, in the struggle for racial justice, and in the already and not yet of the divine drama in our lives—the power of God is loose in the here and now, and our task is to place our hope in that place. To keep watch. To be present. To pay attention to the places God is being born into our world.

One of the great paradoxes of the gospel is that we live in the “already” and the “not yet.” In our Advent waiting, we proclaim that God has come into the world and is actively at work in the world, but God hasn’t finished making all things well...or bringing new life to places of death or making whole what is broken, We begin Advent acknowledging the ways we still need [the Messiah] to come.”² Naming the hopes we have for God’s activity in our world. While we may not know exactly how, we believe that between the already and not yet, God is at work among us and ahead of us, ever and always healing and transforming, resurrection and redeeming. So Keep watch. Be present. Pay attention for such things.

This Advent will likely be a bit different for many of us—many of the rituals and traditions that have shaped these days will not look quite the same this year. Which makes me wonder if we might have a unique opportunity to keep watch for God—not because we

¹ David Lose

² John Stendahl, *Christian Century*, Nov 2002.

need anything else on our to-do lists, but because we desperately need to experience connection in the midst of isolation, to see the glimmers of light in the darkness, tendrils of hope in all that wearies us, signs of peace in all the chaos, gestures of love in all that divides, and glimpses of joy in the many sorrows. And advent invites us to be attentive to such glimmers and tendrils and signs and gestures.

Advent invites us keep watch for God—looking for Christ in the people we cross paths with and Zoom with, in all that we do, and all the spaces we connect. That we might not just focus our attention in Advent on what is ahead—be that our celebrations of the birth of Christ or our hopes about the return of Christ— but hope-filled eyes that allow us to join in a present-tense advent—an advent focused on being awake to God in the world, a present-tense advent that not only expects God’s arrival but assumes God’s ongoing presence in the here and now. In the midst of all of our preparations and our uncertainties, let us keep watch for God, so that we might recognize Jesus, being born into a world in great need of healing and hope.

Every Advent I read again Alan Boesak’s Advent Credo, which always reminds me of the truth that God is loose in the world, no matter what else may be happening in the world. And to keep awake, to be present, and to pay attention to what is true about God and about you and me in Advent and in all times:

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—

This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.

Amen.

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