

# “Those Who Dream....Are Watchful”—Advent 1

November 27, 2022

Pastor Mark Nelson

If you walked into church today, having, over the last few days, gone Christmas shopping, seen all the decorations, or gone out to the Christmas tree lot and set up your tree—today’s Gospel may come as a bit of shock.

Every year, most Christian churches—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestants—along with Lutherans, mess with our pre-Christmas festivities by kicking off the season of Advent with a reading from the Gospels known as the “*little apocalypse*.” “*Apocalypse*.” A word meaning, “*to unveil, reveal*,” also, “*to end or begin*.” Compared to the *big* apocalyptic dream at the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Today’s Gospel *is* a little apocalypse. It’s a pretty short reading.

But it still packs a punch. In the Gospel, Jesus, goes apocalyptic. He talks of roaring seas and nations in distress. He describes an earthquake that shakes all of creation, an event so terrifying that people faint out of fear. The picture that Jesus paints is disturbing and, yes, even frightening.

What’s going on here? The first Sunday of Advent asks Christians to set their clocks ahead, forward through time, to remind us of the promised return of Jesus Christ at some future time.

But more importantly, this kind of apocalyptic talk in the Gospel is not so much predicting the future, as it is talking about the present. Apocalyptic takes evil seriously and God’s action even more so. If things are going to get set right between us and God, God must do it.

Jesus speaks these words just before he gets to his cross. What will happen on the Cross and in the resurrection is the beginning of invasion. Others had talked about the Advent of God’s Kingdom; Jesus announces it is here. A whole new world breaking into the world. Jesus coming from the tomb. And the world shook.

So why start Advent this way? Why go here at all? We get nervous when Jesus goes apocalyptic. We would prefer a different word from Jesus, not one that shakes everything up. If we light the candle of hope this morning, what does the end of the world and all this talk about astronomy and distress and fainting have to do with hope?

To answer these questions you need to know that Bible scholars tell us that the Bible’s great apocalyptic visions rose out of communities experiencing cruelty and persecution. The Book of Revelation in the New Testament and the book of Daniel in the Old were written by people who lived in communities that were occupied by foreign armies, led by horrible people, and so stories about crisis and monsters made sense to these people.

Why does Advent start with this little apocalypse? Because these texts are honest and true. The strange images of Daniel and Revelation didn’t say much to me. Then came COVID-19. With people behind locked doors. Understandably afraid. Then we all understood apocalyptic.

Little apocalypses happen all the time. And Advent acknowledges this. Advent reminds us that our dreams for what this world might become, must begin with the world as it is. Ask the people of Colorado Springs if today’s reading makes sense. Ask the people of Charlottesville

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or Chesapeake, Virginia. Those who live in Ukraine or right over on Penn Avenue in Bloomington. Ask those who grieve in those places about what happens to faith in the midst of an apocalypse.

20 years ago now. When we worked in Cairo, Egypt. One of my responsibilities was to pastor the refugee congregations of those who had escaped Darfur and Sudan. Regularly I would gather with the leaders of these congregations for Bible study; leaders who had been tortured, persecuted by their government, and had fled. It was a challenging class. I came prepared because those guys? They knew their Bibles. And what part of the Bible did they know the best? You guessed it. The apocalyptic books and readings. Some of them had whole chunks of the book of Revelation memorized and they had theories about how and when the world would end. Many of them thought it would end pretty soon.

And you and I can brush off this kind of talk as fantasy. But it wasn't. Escaping one country, only to come to another country where they were hounded and treated violently. These Christians wrestled with the possibility that the world could end for them at any time. It was a reality those leaders and their people faced every day.

And this is where Advent begins. Advent starts us on the path to Christmas with a little apocalypse. The first thing that this season does is throw its arms around all who feel as if they're staring at the end of the world. And I suppose—at some point or another—that is all of us.

What do we do when we find ourselves in this disheartening, discouraging place? "Well," says Jesus. "*When the earth shakes beneath your feet, have courage. Be on guard. Do not be afraid. Don't get weighed down. Be watchful. Pray. And be alert.*"

"Be alert," to what? Well, your own life, for one. I remember something a professor said, about how the second coming of Christ was an idea cooked up by some church father with only two fingers. "*The truth, he said, 'is that Christ comes again, and again, and again—that God has placed no limit on coming to the world. But is always on the way to us here and now. The only thing we are required to do is to notice—to watch, to keep our eyes peeled.'*"

With that in mind, to "*be alert,*" might suggest that every morning when you wake up, decide to live the life God has given you to live right now. Refuse to live yesterday over and over again. Resist the temptation to save your best self for tomorrow. Do not put off living the kind of life you meant to live. There is no time for that, no matter how much time is left.

Go ahead and make the decision: write the letter, get the help you need, find someone to love, give yourself away. Why waste your time? *Live* prepared. "Live a caught-up life; not a put-off life," so that wherever you are, you are ready for God and for whatever happens next. Not afraid but wide awake—watching—watching for the Lord who never gets tired of coming into our lives.

Watch for Him. Be present and alert. Not only in those parts of your life. But in the midst of those little apocalypses. Because in hard times, there is more to see than confusion. "*Look!*"

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says Jesus. “*The leaves of the fig tree are sprouting. The Son of Man. Is coming on a cloud.*” Even; even in the midst of apocalypse. The Kingdom of God is near.

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine recommended I read the story of Vedran Smailovic. So I did.<sup>1</sup> In 1992, the city of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, came under attack by Serbian nationalist forces. The attack would last for four years.

At the beginning of the attack the Serbian army surrounded Sarajevo. They set up artillery on nearby hills and they began pounding the city with Howitzer shells day after day. Sarajevo made it through two world wars, basically undamaged. But now, nothing was spared. Mosques. Churches and museums. Nothing was spared. Hospitals, music schools, libraries were all leveled by artillery shells. There was no electricity, no running water. Thousands lost their lives.

On May 27th, 1992, at around 4:00 PM a mortar round struck a group of people waiting in one of Sarajevo's bread lines. 22 people were killed. Instantly. And many were wounded.

And this is where Smailovic comes in. At 4:00 PM the day after the bread line was bombed, a thin man, wearing a tuxedo, walked into the center of Sarajevo. And stepped into the crater created by that shell. He unfolded a plastic chair, sat down, and lifted his cello from its case and began to play. He played Tomaso Albinoni's, *Adagio in G Minor*. When the performance was finished, the musician in his tux picked up his cello, packed up his chair, and left.

The next day though. Again at 4:00 PM. Smailovic, a former member of the Sarajevo Symphony returned in his dirty tux, with his cello, to the crater. And again he played Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor*. For 22 days—one day for each person who lost their life in the attack—for 22 days, rain or shine, with shells falling around him and sniper bullets whizzing by (one of which destroyed his cello), Smailovic played the *Adagio*. And in the silence between the rocket attacks, this musical piece floated through the wreckage of Sarajevo like a dream.

This is Advent. Advent pulls up a chair in the real world; an often angry, hostile, hard world; a world in which the earth shakes and armies march, and people walk shooting into Vietnamese restaurants and gay night clubs, Walmarts and buses carrying students—and Advent pulls up a chair in our apocalyptic craters and starts to play.

And this is why we can light the candle of hope today with a clear conscience. Hope! Hope does not deny the hard or the harsh. Hope stands in the midst of the hard and the harsh testifying to a better way.

So let us take up the hope to which Jesus Christ calls us this Advent. In all of your Advent preparations, have courage; even in the midst of uncertain times, especially in the midst of uncertain times. Remain watchful. Look for signs of God in life's craters; for the sprouting of leaves, for musical notes, and whose presence is hope for us all. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2020/state-editions/vedran-smailovic--how-one-person-can-make-a-difference.html>

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