

Wake Up! The Apocalypse is Now!

By Pastor Steve Ramer
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First Sunday of Advent, FCMF #1

Scriptures: Isaiah 64 and Mark 13

Isaiah 64: 1-4 & 8

Why don't you tear the sky open and come down?

The mountains would see you and shake with fear.

They would tremble like water boiling over a hot fire.

Come and reveal your power to your enemies

and make the nations tremble at your presence!

There was a time when you came and did terrifying things

that we did not expect; the mountains saw you and shook with fear.

No one has ever seen or heard of a God like you

and who does such deeds for those who put their hope in him....

But you are our father, Lord.

We are the clay, and you are like the potter. (Good News Version)

Mark 13 (Selections)

And Jesus would say to them, "Stay alert, otherwise someone might just delude you! You know, many will come using my name and claim, 'I'm the one!' and they will delude many people.

...But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give off her glow, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly forces will be shaken! And

then they will see the son of Adam coming on the clouds with great power and splendor! ...Take a cue from the fig tree, when its branch is already in bud and leaves come out, you know that summer is near. So, when you see these things take place, you ought to realize that he is near,

just outside your door. ...As for that exact day or minute: no one knows, not even heaven's messengers, not even the son, no one, except the Father. Be on guard! Stay alert! For you

never know what time it is... He may return suddenly and find you asleep. What I'm telling you, I say to everyone: Stay alert!" (Scholars Version)

Sermon

This morning we begin the Christian liturgical season of Advent.

In fact this morning is the beginning

of a whole new liturgical year, so... happy new year!

In this way, I like to think, the church with a contrarian nod,

usurps our cultural calendar by a month or so.

This of course makes some sense, since for Christianity,

a religion based upon Jesus, it does make some sense

to begin the calendar with his birth
in that lowly stable on Christmas morn.
And since Advent is a time for anticipation of this central event,
why not actually back up the beginning of the year a few more weeks?
Anticipation, after all can only heighten the excitement,
and give time to prepare to reenact an event,
in which we Christians believe, "shook the world."
For the next four Sundays prior to Christmas,
our advent planning committee calls us specifically to
"Wake up! Open up, Hollow out and Receive the One who comes.
The One, whom God sends in order to change the world,
in order that nothing, now, will ever be the same.

Other liturgical seasons will follow.

A season called Christmas, begins on Christmas eve,
followed by Epiphany, on the first Sunday of January.
Epiphany will last until Ash Wednesday, when Lent begins,
and Lent ends on Palm Sunday which is the start of Holy Week.
Easter morning, then, begins another season, actually named Easter,
which comes to and end on Pentecost Sunday.
The season of Pentecost is the final and the longest season of the year,
which brings us back again to this morning,
the first Sunday of Advent.

Now for one such as myself, who was raised in a tradition
that did not follow a liturgical calendar,
this is all so wonderfully new and fascinating!

But wait, there's more!

Along with this church year we have a collection of scriptures
to go along with it that we call the lectionary.
The lectionary is laid out in a three year cycle, meaning that
many of the same passages are repeated every three years.
Now this has been happening for centuries and today
we begin "Year B" of the cycle while leaving
"Year A in our rear view mirrors.

Now when I began pastoring over eight years ago,
I decided to try and follow the lectionary,
as best as I could, when prepping sermons.
And so, with a few exceptions, I have used the lectionary suggestions
as my text each time that Advent came around.

After finishing the second cycle several years ago
I began to notice that each of the three years
begins Advent with similar types of scriptures.
Each Advent, these scriptures are filled with cataclysmic imagery,
imagery that was often associated with heralding the day
when the world, as we know it, will come to an end.

Hmm... a bit strange don't you think?
That as the nights get longer and the days colder,
the church (at least in the Northern Hemisphere),
welcomes us to this season, filled with dire warnings
and visions of cosmic calamity!
Just at the time that we are to join our voices
with all those choirs before us in singing,
"Come Oh Come Emanuel",
pleading for God to come and be with us,
and just as we attempt to reconnect ourselves
with our ancient liturgical past,
we actually find ourselves beginning
God's redemption song on it's final verse.
Because each year, at least according to the lectionary,
we begin, not by looking back towards the manger and Jesus' birth
but peering forward into the future, to the ultimate day
when Christ returns and will ultimate set everything right!
A "day," which scripture indicates will be simultaneously
bright and filled with hope as well as dark and dreadful.
It will be an apocalypse which can be anticipated
as both deeply frightful and completely comforting!

Apocalyptic is the term scholars give for talk
that concerns the end of the world.
What we read from the 13th chapter of Mark
is a good example of apocalyptic literature.

It may remind you a whole lot of the Book of Revelations,
whoes title is a translation of the Greek word for apocalypse.
Like a train whistle growing ever louder,
Mark 13 is a warning of the coming apocalypse!
Those who seek to follow Jesus are being tipped off
with some really important, inside information.
So sit up, wake up! and take notice!

for God has heard your cries and God will answer your call.
God is coming, proceeded with an awe inspiring cosmic display,
of solar and lunar eclipses, comets falling and meteor showering.
It will be an astronomer's wildest dream!
The end is near! And so the church universal
actually begins its new year at the end!
The focus is not, "away in a manger" somewhere,
but on what ultimately waits for the entirety
of God's groaning creation in God's final rodeo!

And so this is Christmas!
Welcome to Advent!
And so if you pay attention,
if you can "wake up and smell the coffee!" this Advent,
you will realize that Advent has very little to do
with serene manger scenes filled with tiny, fat, white babies,
or with fuzzy donkeys, fluffy sheep and sleepy cows!
And if you choose to be alert to the liturgy for the next few weeks,
you will learn that Advent does have far more to do
with pregnant teens, and scary dreams.
During Advent we are confronted with the harsh realities of
ruthless military occupation, economic exploitation,
and gross human rights violations that were part and parcel
of the Roman Empire's colonial enterprise!
You may also be shocked and amazed to hear that it also includes
crazy, long haired, wild men, living on the edge of society,
obviously off their meds and literally screaming their heads off
about a coming new age of justice and peace.
You may find yourself in awe and wonder,
reminded that it was a bunch of smelly farm laborers
who first came to the manger.
Don't suppose for a minute that they had showers
out there with them on those lonely hillsides.
And you will also be correct that it is a story about a baby, a tiny,
helpless infant struggling to survive in a drafty, germ invested barn.
A baby born to a homeless, soon to be immigrant couple
fleeing for their lives to a neighboring country.
And if you do pay attention and listen carefully
you'll realize that it is a very real and very human story!
It is a story that we must repeat each and every year!
A necessary reminder, that each and every year and against all the odds,
a new birth within our hearts must also take place!

And when you think about it really, our reality is not so different.
We still find a whole lot to be in afraid of these days!
We are also tempted to follow many a false prophet and to accept
false teachings that our survival is dependent upon; military might
or on sexist, racist, homophobic and ethnocentric ideologies.
We focus our fears on catching Ebola,
while thousands die in Africa

We dig and frack and destroy God's good creation
while the cataclysm of global warming eliminates
entire species on a weekly basis!
Wars for our nation's imperial dominance rage in Iraq, Afghanistan
and Palestine ushering in a certain apocalypse for millions.
The first Sunday of advent has now been eclipsed with another
"holy" day marking the start of the Christmas season.
Unintentionally, but most appropriately, named "Black Friday"
the season that is supposed to welcome the Prince of Peace,
actually has become a day where we see, seemingly good
and normal folks willingly engage in violence in order to obtain
a child's toys or select electronic devices at "deep discounts."

Oh ya, this is Christmas, 20 - 14!
And what have we done?!
Another year older, but a new one has just begun!
Oh God, that you would tear open the sky and come down!
Come down and do something! Fix it!
Help us! Save us from ourselves!
Wake us up! Get our attention!
Do it by any means necessary, be they comets, or meteors,
earthquakes or turning off the sun!
Wake us up, shake us up!
Scare the bejeeber's out of us!
Or maybe scare a little bit of the life of Jesus back into us?!

Come thou long expected Jesus
 come and rip us from our comfortableness!
Come oh come, Emanuel
 come and give us some of that same compassion
 that you love others and your created universe with!
Come oh God and be with us
 and from our bad mistakes and fears release us!
Come oh power to deliver,
 come dwell in our hearts and set us free!
So, ya all better wake up! The Apocalypse is now!
 THIS is the Advent that has arrived!