
Why Your Apocalypse is Personal

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Advent 1 – Year C

You may not think so, but the apocalypse is very personal. The kind of apocalypse you envision for the end of the world depends on the kind of person you are. That's why today's scriptures, appointed for this first Sunday of Advent, focus on three attitudes or dispositions in order to get us ready for the coming of Christ into the world. The first attitude gets commended to us by our Lord himself in today's gospel reading (Luke 21:28):

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

"Stand up and raise your heads," Jesus demands, "because your redemption is drawing near." Now who among us would think to have that kind of attitude to end of the world, as Jesus described it in the preceding verses (Luke 21:25-27)?

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory."

So we're expected to "stand up and raise our heads," Jesus says, rejoicing that 'our redemption is drawing near.' Moreover our other New Testament reading, from St. Paul writing to the Thessalonians, exhorts us in a similar way with a second attitude or disposition (1 Thessalonians 3:13):

[May God] so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

So we're also exhorted to 'strengthen our hearts in a holy way' at this Second Coming of Jesus, and so we may be "blameless" and not afraid because of the "distress among nations." Other people "will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world." But not us, Paul proclaims. Rather, we are to strength our hearts in the ways of holiness during apocalyptic times and events.

Now, church friends, here we find the readings giving us such ironic and counterintuitive directives, completely contrary to ordinary reactions and conventional expectations, and even coaching us to be countercultural in a subversive way.

Now, as I reflected on these scriptures for today I tried to find, in our current 21st century context, similar kinds of irony or counterintuitive directives such as Holy Scripture gives us today. My criteria were the two attitudes or dispositions I've already highlighted: 1) stand up and raise your heads, as Jesus said in today's gospel, and 2) strengthen your hearts in holiness so you may be blameless and not afraid, as St. Paul said. And in a more lighthearted perspective, not focused on apocalyptic or catastrophic times and events, I recalled some witty affirmations that you've probably heard also on various occasions. Let's see how they can illuminate or interact with today's more dire and alarming texts as we begin this Advent season.

- Sing like no one's listening
- Dance like nobody's watching
- Love like you've never been hurt, and
- Live like it's heaven on earth.

They're all ironic and counterintuitive also, aren't they? It's unlikely that a person will 'sing like no one's listening,' except when we're alone, right? But in groups we're likely to be quite self-conscious that we have a listening audience. Similarly, when we're dancing we can feel a heightened awareness of others watching us. Then the stakes get even higher if we're asked to 'love like you've never been hurt,' right? Now perhaps the ultimate, most transcendent achievement is to 'live like heaven is already here on earth.' That last version of irony brings us to today's Advent anticipation of the Second Coming; the Second Coming of Christ to inaugurate "a new heaven and a new earth"—as we find prophesied in the Bible's Book of the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation (21:1).

But before going there, however, let's notice some variations on those four affirmations: Sing like no one's listening, dance like nobody's watching, love like you've never been hurt, and live like its heaven on earth. For example, someone has added a fifth line that says, 'work like you don't need the money.' How's that one for being countercultural? Not only that, but in a more humorous vein I also discovered these three variations:

- *Work as if somebody's watching* (watching to see if you deserve your paycheck)
- *Dance like you can't possibly get hurt* (hurt yourself making those dances moves) and
- *Listen like you really need money* (like you need to pay attention to every word).

Oh well, so much for humor! But before leaving humor entirely we should note the popular joke about the Second Coming of Christ as told by comedian George Carlin. Maybe you've heard this one too: 'Jesus is coming; look busy!'

In that connection, I wonder if we might come up with an approach to Advent and the Apocalypse that is not about being busy or anxious or obsessed, but rather something serene or confident. Consider in that connection the story told about St. Francis. As he was working in the garden one day someone asked: "What would you do if you knew the world would end today?" He replied, "I suppose I would finish hoeing this row of beans."

Precisely here, I commend to you this triumphant attitude, which combines our quest for a mature attitude to apocalypse with another Christian proverb: Be ready for apocalypse as if you believed, 'all the way to heaven is heaven.' Yes, I propose that a balanced and mature response to apocalyptic times and events is more like that third and final disposition enjoined on us today in Jesus' final words in the gospel reading. Notice too that this exhortation also pertains to our hearts. "Be on your guard," Jesus says (Luke 21:34, 36):

'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life . . . [but] at all times, praying that you may have the strength . . . to stand before the Son of Man.'

'Strength of heart to stand blameless,' to return to St. Paul's words, is the attitude toward apocalyptic times and events that we are directed embrace in Advent. And that is how these Advent themes of preparation and warning become both personal and revealing for us. Are our hearts "weighed down" with the allures or excesses or "worries of this life" so that we feel blamed? Or rather, are our hearts strong with the mature expectation that even apocalyptic times and events are prologue to God's 'new heaven and new earth' that remains to be revealed? Each individual answer to that question determines how the Second Coming of Christ is personal to us. As you observe a holy Advent in these next few weeks, may you also be strengthened by our Psalm appointed for today, Psalm 25:1-9, as we pray together:

1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;
my God, I put my trust in you;
let me not be humiliated,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.

2 Let none who look to you be put to shame;
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.

3 Show me your ways, O LORD,

and teach me your paths.

4 Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.

5 Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love,
for they are from everlasting.

6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions;
remember me according to your love
and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.

7 Gracious and upright is the LORD;
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.

8 He guides the humble in doing right
and teaches his way to the lowly.

9 All the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

Book of Common Prayer, p. 614-615