

Advent 1 Year A 2016

Happy new year!... Today we begin a new liturgical year in the church.... We have finished our regular reading of Luke, and we have begun a year of readings from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is viewed by some commentators as the most Jewish of the gospel authors. That's not true... The others are equally grounded in Hebrew scripture; all of early Christian literature swims, as it were, in Judaism; but Matthew, more than the other Gospel writers is the concerned with the practice of Torah: faith as practice... His premise is that it is in practicing the rudiments of the faith that we come to believe... that practice informs believing... To practice sacrifice, and compassion, and embrace, and non-violence, then one comes to believe in sacrifice, and compassion, and embrace, and non-violence....we'll see that as we read through Matthew during the coming year...

So the church year begins with Advent, the time of preparation for Christmas... a time of expectation and hope, but it is expectation and hope set against the fading light of day in our hemisphere. It is the time of the year when darkness falls upon us... and yet Advent, paradoxically, is a season of hope, of expectation, of pregnancy, of possibility... a poignant contrast to be sure.... Life is that way.

“Lo he comes with clouds descending.” Those the first words of hymn 57 which we just sang... words that I remember from childhood....words full of hope for a dramatic coming of God’s anointed... God’s anointed who will set things right... God’s anointed who will at last defeat the powers of evil in the world... A forceful testimony to the light overcoming the darkness...The imagery of the Savior coming amid the clouds is found in the ancient lore of Israel.... Ancient even to the people of the first century... It is an image out of the genre of Apocalyptic literature...literature that emerged in the second century B.C.E. during a time of great trial and oppression for the people of Israel... Jerusalem and the Levant were occupied by the Assyrian despot Antiochus Epiphanies... Martial law was in effect.... Food was scarce ... and to add insult to injury, the Jerusalem Temple was filled with the pagan iconography of the Assyrians.... a deep wound to the dignity and sovereignty and psyche of the Jewish people... During this period in Israel’s history, when the world was falling apart... sound familiar?.... During this time when the world was falling apart, the biblical literature was chiefly concerned with ‘end times’ The final consummation of God’s reign in earth... the Book of Daniel is one example with its bizarre, otherworldly imagery... also, the Book of Enoch, which never made it into the Hebrew canon of scripture, but was highly influential nonetheless. Elaine Pagals, a biblical scholar specializing

in end-times theology , observes that in many cultures under stress, their literature and art become apocalyptic... concerned with matters of dramatic and painful reordering... death and rebirth.

This Hebrew apocalyptic literature depicted God as a warrior dispelling the forces of oppression, and ushering in a reign of peace and prosperity... A central figure in this literature is the mysterious Son of Man... God's representative who comes in the clouds to earth... Matthew refers often to this imagery of the Son of Man, connecting him to the figure of Jesus, thereby connecting Jesus to the Apocalyptic lore of the tradition... Luke refers to the Son of Man only once... Mark and John never mention him.... But the imagery goes back even further in the tradition. In the Book of Proverbs, probably compiled during the Jewish exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E. the figure of Wisdom, the goddess, is portrayed as descending to earth in the clouds... She is the creative force of the universe... God's master builder she is called... And in the Book of Proverbs, not only does she create, but she brings justice, she teaches the ways of God... she protects God's people from error.... The implication being that the created order is still becoming from one apocalypse to the next... that the created order is not an end unto itself but a dramatic and dynamic process.

So for Matthew this coming new age is a creation story... that the creation story is still being told, that the creation is a process of ends and beginnings... that the way of the world is a dramatic cycle of death to the old and birth to the new... and that the predisposition of the faithful is to live in imaginative expectation of the coming of the new, and to hold fast to the belief that it is good.... And that it is the practice of goodness that engenders our belief in the Good... The apocalypse is always upon us, because that is the drama and pathos of the created order... and therefore we do not fear because all the signs, if we are paying attention... all signs point to the entire process as Good.... Our practice of the good, a dramatic sign.

The older I get, the more I know that things just don't turn out the way I thought they would or the way I planned they would.... I could never in a million years imagine my life as it is now... The older I get the more I know that life is a succession of exquisite randomness... I am now, surer than ever, that God doesn't have a plan... but that amid the dark and the light, amid the old and the new, between the now and the not yet... God is improvising into being the beautiful and the true... and Matthew's admonition to us this morning is that we keep awake to this glorious process.... Not so much becoming in high dramatic fashion from heaven... like coming in the clouds... but becoming nonetheless in high

drama in the mundane matters of earth... in eating and drinking, in marrying, in the grinding of meal, Matthew's examples... God's advent is manifest in the common things of earth, no less dramatic than the majesty of the Apocalyptic genre... God's dramatic advent is manifest in every mundane act of love.... In acts of compassion and mercy, in loving kindness and doing justice... these are the rudiments of our practice as the baptized that will change the world, change the world as if God, Godself came among us with clouds descending.... And that coming bears telling with high metaphor and great drama.... We can only speak of such things in the language of the imagination, the language of beauty.

Keep awake, good people... pay attention to the now.... As for the future, know that God doesn't have a plan other than to renew and restore our world... God doesn't have a plan other than to love the world into its perfection... How that will happen, no one knows...It will be improvised into being, and we as God's chosen are participants in this improvisation of Love... we don't know how or when... I'm not so sure God knows how or when... but it will happen amid the random iterations of beauty and truth....And our practice of the faith is a matter of trusting that process.

I do know this: This Advent will be like birth... first pain, then a fragile joy...
that is the way the world begins...as it always has... and as it always will.