

SITTING IN DARKNESS
FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT: HOPE
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We understand Jeremiah's words of promise and hope.

We want THEM to be true: God will send someone to ensure we live in safety.

We easily can lift our voices with the psalmist's

and ask God to thwart the treacherous and be compassionate to us.

Paul's words to the Thessalonians are just lovely.

Who doesn't like to be praised and told we're a source of joy?

But this reading from Luke? What are we supposed to do with that?

Where's the Merry Christmas and good will to all people in that? Ho Ho Ho.

It's threatening and awful and not what we want to hear from Jesus.

As we recoil from the dire images Jesus is painting, keep in mind

that just two days after describing them, he will be tortured and executed
by the religious and political elite of the day.

At his death, Scripture reports that planets and heavenly bodies shook,
and people fainted from fear and foreboding; the disciples fled and hid.

So, as Advent begins, we are being asked to consider seriously
the very nature of the god we say is coming.

Have we blindly swallowed the notion of an ultimate, inexorable enforcer that tribal chieftains,
ancient and modern, developed as a convenient myth that they use to control humanity?

The chief priests and Pilate harnessed that kind of power to terrify people.

Indeed, the viewpoint that prevails in contemporary scientific circles is that all religion is a humbug,
fictions designed to delude or deceive us, manipulated by the religious and political elite
to secure their positions.¹

Or, is there really something more, someone magnificently bigger than we are?

Is there One who has deliberately called us into being, who knows far more than we do
about what will bring a sense of meaning to our fleeting span of years,
and whose righteousness is the fulfillment of all human hopes?

Annie Dillard, a marvelous author and canny observer of humanity,

suspects most of us aren't even aware of the choice before us. She writes:

Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?

The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear straw hats and velvet to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.²

The sleeping God may wake someday and take offense.

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¹ The view of Yuval Noah Harari in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Harper, 2015)

² Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper Perennial rev. ed 2013, pp 52-53

Today's Collect and Scripture readings are at the end of the sermon text.

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Ms. Dillard, with Paul, dares us to take quite seriously the promise of the second coming of God, though we need to do this only if we believe God came the first time, or at least God's presence in Creation as more than a convenient fiction.

Now, I grew up in the church. I blithely played with dynamite on Sundays.

Then, as a college student getting a degree in cognitive psychology, I became a skeptic of many truth claims, demanding clarity, probity, and a much firmer foundation than appeals to authority and tradition.

Along with many other scientifically-trained people, I rejected the notion of a deity, stopped making batches of spiritual TNT, and shifted my hope from salvation coming from some god to the hope that humanity would brilliantly save itself, cleverly solving all its problems through science, technology, engineering and math – though the math part was not my strong suit.

What wonders humanity has achieved through those disciplines!

Discoveries in medicine, agriculture, transportation and computerization have transformed our world in at lightning speed just in my lifetime.

Of course, it's exactly those disciplines that helped us to discover not only TriNitroToluene, but a million other ways to destroy, deforest, demolish and desecrate the planet we depend on. I gradually discerned that the scientific mindset is, ultimately, utilitarian: if something is not useful to the prevailing priorities of what the people who call the shots want to achieve, it's perfectly OK to discard, dismiss, devalue, and demonize whatever is useless – including people.

Basically, where a utilitarian, amoral scientific approach takes us is dedication to individualism and self-interest, to grabbing for all the gusto we can, however we define "gusto." After all, why not? The best and brightest deserve the biggest share.

Besides, there's no one to stop us.

Yet, as one of the best and brightest given freedom to get whatever I wanted, I felt a gnawing, growing sense of despair. If grabbing for gusto was the goal, whatever happened on this big blue marble floating silently in space was actually pretty pointless.

But I could not go back to the stern, chauvinistic religion of my childhood.

Filling the void with manipulative fairy tales was ridiculous.

Then tragedy slammed into my orderly if meaningless world.

In the Christmas of 1982, Gus and I anticipated the birth of our firstborn; by the end of March we buried her before she ever took a breath.

The best and the brightest were no match for death.

I managed to get through my days: get up, go to work, cook dinner (yes, I can cook, I just don't like to do it and I'm not good at it), pay bills, even have pleasant relationships, then close my eyes every night wishing I wouldn't wake up.

Day after pointless day, I sat in darkness.

I think a lot of humanity sits in darkness, day after pointless day, and we deal with the tragedy, death, and pointlessness by numbing ourselves with some form or another of drunkenness, some kind of consumption to fill the void, whether it's too much booze, too much shopping, or my anesthetic of choice, too much work.

We're anxious about everything and seek more and more numbness until we are paralyzed and just waiting for it all to be over.

It is in that darkness that we know at some level that our idols have failed, all our self-interested schemes have turned to dust, and we have nothing.

Most of me hopes that, if you haven't sat in that darkness, you never, ever have to.

It's a desolate and horrible place where nothing makes sense. And yet.

And yet, it is one of the great mysteries of spiritual growth and maturation that it is when we feel we've lost everything that we are most ready to discern another realm of beingness: God's kingdom.

This reign cannot be proven by science because it is beyond seeing, touching, tasting, smelling, feeling or measuring, and yet is the most compelling reality I have ever experienced. It is magnificent. The thought of controlling it is ludicrous.

God's realm of beingness, God's reign, God's kingdom, is not separate from the world our senses know, in fact, it encompasses, enfolds and empowers it.

But it's so much bigger, the only way to talk about it is with metaphors, parables and experiences about seeds and pearls and yeast and families, and even then, sometimes, words fail – words can't ever explain the mystery of the Kingdom, they can only point to it.

Taking the Reign of God seriously is what Jesus is talking about in today's passage: when the ways of the Kingdom of God are contrasted with humanity's, what can God do but take offense at our selfishness and utilitarianism?

God's Reign will expose the folly

of our nationalistic, scientific, and individualistic attempts to manipulate each other; all humanity's orderly institutions will discover how very little they actually control and will be dismayed as the structures of the powerful topple in confusion, and we are shaken to our very foundations

as our proud achievements are swept away in the roaring sea and surging waves, and we are shown that true riches come, as Paul taught, when we love each other and everyone as God loves us.

How much does God love us? God loves us, literally, to death.

If we truly hope for the redemption of God,

for the kind of freedom and joy that God has promised through the prophets, to avoid being trapped by a prison of numbness we build for ourselves,

we must stay alert and, as the psalmist sings, learn righteousness, grace, mercy, humility, compassion and love from God.

And so, Annie is so very right: if we really believe in the magnificence of God, in something ever so much bigger than our human brilliance,

then we indeed need to put on our crash helmets and life preservers, lash ourselves to the pews and have our signal flares at hand,

and maybe we can show just a little awe on a Sunday morning

as we invoke God's divine power to make heaven and earth meet at the table, in the bread and in the wine.

It's a quiet moment, but exhilarating. Stay awake or you'll miss it!

Be strong, lift up your heads: our hearts' desire, our greatest hope, is real:

the Human One is already here and yet always is on the way, coming in glory and splendor into each generation,

into every broken soul longing for healing,

until the ancient, gracious promises are all fulfilled

and we stand up straight, raise our heads with joy,

and reach out our very own hands

to hold the power that shakes the planets.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

Almighty God, your sovereign purpose brings salvation to birth. Give us faith to be steadfast amid the tumults of this world, trusting that your kingdom comes and your will is done through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

JEREMIAH 33:14–16

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness.

PSALM 25:1–9

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.

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

Show me your ways, O LORD, and teach me your paths.

**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.**

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

**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.**

Gracious and upright is the Lord; therefore, he teaches sinners in his way.

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

All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies

1 THESSALONIANS 3:9–13

How can we thank God enough for you, given all the joy we have because of you before our God? Night and day, we pray more than ever to see all of you in person and to complete whatever you still need for your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus guide us on our way back to you. May the Lord cause you to increase and enrich your love for each other and for everyone in the same way as we also love you. May the love cause your hearts to be strengthened, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his people. Amen.

LUKE 21:25–36

[Jesus said,] "There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves. The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great splendor. Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near."

Jesus told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God's kingdom is near. I assure you that this generation won't pass away until everything has happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

"Take care that your hearts aren't dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life. Don't let that day fall upon you unexpectedly, like a trap. It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth. Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand before the Human One."

SERMON HYMN: *Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn*