

First Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44

1 December 2019

Beginning at the End

At the recent Harvard-Yale Football game, students from both schools took to the field to protest their universities' investments in the fossil fuel industry and in the debt of Puerto Rico, the part of the United States most ravaged by climate change. Holding banners saying "Our *future* demands action *now*," the students chanted: "Disclose, divest, or this will be our death."

College students, we love to say, have their whole lives before them. College means independence, a new beginning, a path to a promising future. But if you're beginning college in these days, it can feel like your exciting new beginning has inconveniently coincided with the end of the world. Last week, the United Nations released its annual report on global greenhouse gas emissions, and it's clear that the world is way off track. In order for the planet to have a chance of avoiding the worst of the intense droughts and storms that are already carrying destruction, hunger and social unrest in their wake, we have to cut our emissions, drastically, and soon. The policy director at the Union of Concerned Scientists said in response to the UN's report, "We are sleepwalking toward a climate catastrophe and need to wake up and take urgent action." But who will take this urgent action? Who will lead? The United States remains, along with China, the biggest polluter on earth; we have actually *increased* our emissions over the past year. Is it any wonder student protesters are chanting about death?

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year for Christian communities all around the globe--and a new beginning for each of us, if we will take it. If you're like me, you spend the year struggling against time—it's something to try to stay ahead of, something to manage. When Advent arrives, though, we have an opportunity to remember that time is God's gift to us, a sign of God's hope in us. To live within time is to live within the possibility that we could change, that the world could change, that we could begin again. As one year gives way to another, we are also invited to give way—to seek forgiveness, or offer it. To turn toward the mountain of God that Isaiah speaks of in the passage Francesca read for us, where weapons of war are reshaped as tools of human flourishing and violent ways are unlearned.

But the beginning of Advent, this first Sunday, always starts, not at any sort of recognizable beginning, but with discussions of the end. We meet Jesus, not as a baby in a manger, but as a teacher, offering his last teachings on last things. These are often called Jesus' apocalyptic teachings, from a Greek word meaning to disclose or reveal something hidden. In all four of the gospels, but most strikingly in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the last discussions Jesus has with his disciples before they eat the Passover meal together, before he is arrested, before he is tortured and killed are "apocalyptic" teachings about his return in glory, and the end of history, and how the disciples ought to live in the meantime.

The lesson Sonia read for us this morning is one of these apocalyptic teachings. The Son of Man will come, Jesus says, while everyone's eating and drinking and getting married—unexpectedly, like the flood in the days of Noah. “Then two will be in the field;” he says, “one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.” It's hard not to read this passage as an account of what has come to be called, in our culture at least, as the Rapture, an event at the end of time in which followers of Christ will be gathered up to heaven at Christ's second coming. But the Rapture is not really a biblical idea—it's more of an American idea, cultivated, in part, by Harvard president Increase Mather and his son, Cotton Mather, in the seventeenth century and further popularized in the twentieth by the “Left Behind” novels. In this passage, though, it's not clear that those who suddenly disappear are the fortunate ones, nor is it clear whether they have been gathered up to God or if they have been overtaken by the terrors of history. Jesus compares the coming change to the flood that Noah survived—a story in which was definitely better to have been left behind than swept away out of sight.

Whatever Jesus meant by this story, what comes across clearly in this passage is the sense of the unexpected breaking through into our ordinary life in time, while we eat and drink, marry and work. The ordinary stuff of our lives is where we will encounter the Advent, the coming, of Christ. But we never know when that might happen—even I don't know, Jesus tells his disciples, not even the angels in heaven have any idea. The Son of Man comes, he says, at an unexpected hour. So, he tells his disciples and us as well, stay awake, stay ready for the world to change in any moment. Jesus calls us to cultivate a wakefulness that keeps us turned toward the possibility of change, even of the most radical kind.

Still, Advent is a *beginning* that invites us to take the first steps of a new pilgrimage, following Jesus as he is born, as he crosses borders with his parents to flee political violence, as he grows into a thoughtful child who likes to sit and talk with the rabbis, as he presents himself to John for baptism, as he disappears into the desert and reappears in the towns. As he teaches and heals. As he turns with his followers toward Jerusalem. So why begin Advent here, at the *end* of his ministry and his attempts to imagine the end of the age—something as unknowable to him as it is to us?

My colleague in the Divinity School, the theologian Mayra Rivera, reminded us at our faculty retreat last spring that, for many people, the end of the world is not some distant, unimaginable possibility but something that has already happened and is continually happening. Those whose towns and neighborhoods have been wiped off the map by floods and storms have already experienced the end of the world. Just this morning, I read an editorial in the New York Times by a student in Hong Kong who describes what she is experiencing as the end of the world. The author and the first readers of the gospel of Matthew had also experienced the end of the world when the forces of the Roman empire destroyed their temple in Jerusalem and bore away its holy objects. Earlier in chapter 24, the author of the gospel has Jesus predict this catastrophe. Pointing to the temple buildings, he tells his disciples: not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

The apocalyptic teachings Jesus offers his disciples are not meant to scare them or the readers of this gospel. Living under Roman occupation, they are already scared; they are already living, as

we are, in frightening times. These apocalyptic teachings are meant to help the disciples and those to whom they will bring the good news to find the courage to keep beginning again, even in the face of danger, even in the midst of uncertainty, even as the world ends. Perhaps this is why Advent always begins by drawing our attention to endings—to remind us of what is at stake when we begin again at Advent to try again to be guided by love and mercy, to try again to seek justice, to try again to be present to those around us, to try again to wake up to the presence of the sacred in our midst. To try again to rebuild what has been dismantled, stone by stone. To try again to change.

Another voice from the end of the world that meets us at the beginning of each Advent is the voice of the prophet Isaiah. His book opens with a description of a country lying desolate, bruised and bleeding. And, like Jesus, he tries to point to what might come next, in, as he puts it, the “days to come.” The beginning amidst the end that Isaiah imagines is a pilgrimage in which people from all nations move together toward a future without violence. It’s an audacious vision, one that has undergirded movements for justice and peace in many times and places. But it is also a vision that remains unfulfilled and so can be easy to disregard as something beautiful but unattainable. But Isaiah, like the author of the gospel of Matthew, is living in the wake of a violent catastrophe, an end of the world, and knows that his community’s survival depends on their being able to begin again, differently. In the new beginning he imagines, the people of the earth set out together to learn a new way of living, a way that will require everyone to change.

Last year, the dean of religious and spiritual life at the University of Southern California, Varun Soni, received a Peter J. Gomes Award from the Divinity School to honor his ministry with students over many years. During his acceptance speech, he said that, when he first became a chaplain, students would come to ask him “How should I live?” Now, he told us, they come to ask him: “Why should I live?” This question gathers up a whole host of questions about the world these students are inheriting. Will it be livable? Will it be safe? Will it be a place into which they would ever bring a child? Why should I live, they ask their chaplain, if the end is so near?

The students who held up the football game a few weeks ago offered an answer to that question. Why should we live? To keep faith with the future. To remain watchful, not only on our own behalf, but on behalf of those whose worlds are already ending. To insist on change. To keep a vision of a different way of living alive and to set out in its direction. With their eyes on what is coming if we cannot muster the courage and the energy for a new beginning, they and the generations following them will lead our world, if we’re lucky, through a rapid change that will require the kind of radical solidarity that Isaiah describes.

The ancient Stoic philosophers believed that there was nothing like keeping one’s end in mind to shape how we live in the present. They meditated on their own deaths in order to cherish more fully the present moment and to live it in more attentively. On this first Sunday of Advent, we stand at the intersection of endings and beginnings seeking that same wakefulness, that same sharpening of attention to what is inside of us and what is all around us. As the old year ends, we look toward the future in all of its peril and its promise. We remember and recite visions of the end and visions of what could yet be. One of the youngest among us lights the first candle to illuminate our way. And just as in every moment of every day, God invites us to begin again.

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Stephanie Paulsell
The Memorial Church
Harvard University