

I can remember my experience of Advent during the time I was in Medical School. I was quite separated from church, or Advent or any other religious thing. Not to mention the fact that I was raised in what we might call a “low church” tradition, where Advent was pretty non-existent. It was all just ‘pre-Christmas’.

Rick Morley, an Episcopal priest from New Jersey says, “Really, we’ve lost Advent. Society at large doesn’t consider “Advent,” if society at large has even heard of it. Society at large is shopping, and wrapping, and decking.”

But even so, at this time of year things felt a bit empty if I weren’t doing something bright and cheerful. So, one year I made a cute little Christmas village from Balsa wood and acrylic paints, with cotton batting snow.

The next December I painted and fired a ceramic Nativity set for my family. They set it out on the fireplace mantel, with my youngest sister putting a small ceramic frog beside the Holy Family. She referred to it as “the little frog of Bethlehem”. I was ‘shopping, wrapping and decking’ like a son of a gun, but Christmas wasn’t really any more filled with ‘comfort and joy’.

Things didn’t really shift until I went to Yale to seminary and actually learned Advent which is not so much about a baby in a manger but about the coming of Christ. There I met texts like the one from Mark’s gospel today:

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

These words were written by Mark in a bleak time of crisis for his church. After another revolt by the people of Israel, the

Romans had burned down Jerusalem, destroyed the Holy Temple and driven the people away from the demolished city. It surely seemed like the end of the world.

It's natural that Mark wrote in the style of what is called Apocalyptic –literature for a crisis, revealing what is hidden. But unlike the quintessential apocalypics, Daniel and The Revelation, Mark didn't speak of the destruction of the world, or the punishment of sinners. Rather he urged believers to stay awake and be watchful, because Jesus was coming with the angels to rescue his distressed people.

The problem is that over the centuries after this Gospel, the coming of Jesus didn't seem to happen. Believing shifted from 'now' to 'someday', which may have seemed to most of us like 'never'. But perhaps now is the time for us to recover the meaning of Apocalyptic, since surely in 2020 we are in an endless year of crisis.

We are immersed in a pandemic, the plague which has killed hundreds of thousands of us, confined us once again to our homes, cancelled Thanksgiving. Our children have been closed out of their schools and sports. Hundreds of small businesses are closing daily, many to never return.

This is also a time when our nation is profoundly divided, producing incredible political instability, interfering with the outcome of our election. It often feels as though it could topple our democracy. It has been a year of violence in the streets, riots following police killings of people of color.

And perhaps one of the specifically distressing things for us, a parallel to what had devastated Mark's community, is that our 'Temple', our houses of worship, are as if they were destroyed. We cannot worship as we did before, gathered together, singing hymns, receiving Eucharist and greeting one another with God's Peace. While we do what we can to put other worship in place, it is not the same.

We are caught in the huge trap of all these losses, and certainly need the word of hidden hope which the Mark's Gospel speaks. How are we to grab hold of that and go on? We don't need to focus on a better past or a possible future, but on the present as it is. We don't need to first solve any of our problems, before God will reach out.

God, who has been born for us, is coming now for every spouse who is grieving the loss of their beloved, every person who is dying alone; for every person trapped in addiction; for every weary nurse who feels unable to take another step; every person from Central America who is fleeing with nothing left after two hurricanes; every soldier who has suffered moral injury in wars to which they have been sent by us and for us.

How critical it is for us that Jesus became incarnate into all of our life – the shivering crisis of birth, the soldiers marching everywhere, the continual hard labor, the inevitable death.

As TS Eliot writes in his poem about the journey of the Magi,

“There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt.
I have seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different;
this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us,
like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation . . .”

In our time and place we have usually been able to ignore the law of our mortality. But now as death surrounds us, we need to follow the Apostle Mark's admonition and stay awake for Christ's coming, learn a deeper kind of spiritual attention to catch

a glimpse of our salvation. We need to focus our watching on the smaller pieces of what is around us.

I have a friend, a retired pastor living in the middle of Pennsylvania, who every day walks his dog around his small town. At each house or store, unknown to those who live and work there, he prays for everyone, calling down a blessing on each and all.

When we look out our windows, we probably see more neighbors on the street walking, biking and pushing baby carriages, than we ever have before. This small parade, attended to, could become words, floating through our prayers, like parts of a poem.

We could be watching carefully as the seasons change, with the pattern of stars overhead shifting and showing both the progression and constancy of the God who holds us all in being.

Our alertness to any of these things brings us closer to the healing, cosmic presence of God. As Mary Oliver said, “[I am keeping] my mind on what matters which is my work which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.”

Any and all of these things can become our lifeline, showing us the God who has forgotten no one, leaves no one behind. Reach out now to touch the bright certainty of our salvation, the closeness of our creator, the great cloud of witnesses cheering us on. Stay awake and rejoice!