

Advent Apocalypse

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[0 : 00] The first season of Advent that I can remember observing in a truly meaningful way was years ago, soon after we had moved to England.

We were grad students, and we were living in the granny flat of a large house owned by a retired couple in our parish church in Cambridge, and they eventually became dear friends, and adoptive grandparents to our children, but we were just becoming Anglican in those days.

Neither Alicia nor I had grown up in liturgical traditions, and the church calendar was still somewhat mysterious to us. But this retired couple that we were living with, these were true Anglicans.

They had been born and raised in the Church of England, and I can still remember our first Advent season in their large 18th century house. At the start of Advent, they squeezed a large Christmas tree through the front door, and they positioned it in their massive foyer with its stone floors and its paneled walls and its double height ceiling with balconies that ran three sides around the very top. And I, as a distinctly non-liturgical American, thought to myself, now it is decorating time. We are about a month out from Christmas, so we're getting a little bit of a late start.

[1 : 43] But this place is going to look great for getting in the Christmas spirit. And so I had teed up an Andy Williams Christmas album on my iPod, and we put some eggnog in the refrigerator to chill, and I began to consider strategically which balcony we should have an elf on the shelf peering down at everyone as they walked in the entrance.

But they did not decorate for the entire season of Advent. And to my shock, they did not decorate that large Christmas tree in the foyer.

That didn't happen until Christmas Eve after we came back from a Christmas Eve service, and then lights were strung, and Christmas decorations appeared all over the house, and we kicked off these 12 days of celebration, the 12 days of Christmas, with gift-giving and Christmas crackers and Christmas dinners, with adults having proper conversations while they had little paper crowns perched on their head.

There's nothing like it. And eating massive wheels of Stilton cheese and bringing up dusty bottles of Bordeaux from the basement. It was an amazing celebration.

But what I remember most from that year was what I learned about Advent. In a kind of weird way, that empty, unadorned tree in the foyer taught me far more than if there had been no tree at all.

[3 : 23] I would walk past it every day, and it stood there kind of like a sentry, guarding Advent, reminding every person who walked past that it is not yet Christmas.

And we are still in a season of stillness and of waiting. I am reminded of that tree whenever we come into church during the season of Advent.

We show up, and the engines for Christmas outside of church, they have been going full throttle for weeks. I just saw an article in which Martha Stewart recommends that you start preparing for Christmas early by decorating for Halloween using white pumpkins.

You heard it here first. But in contrast, you walk into church, and instead of festive lights, it's a little bit more subdued. What we primarily have is one or two candles from our Advent wreath burning.

And even the Advent candles have a kind of soberness to them. In recent times, we have renamed them as hope, love, joy, and peace, the four candles.

[4 : 46] But in earlier eras, they represented the four traditional themes of Advent. Death, judgment, heaven, that's a good one, and hell.

In that order. And waiting to greet us throughout the month of Advent is not Santa Claus, not even sweet, cuddly baby Jesus.

The main character, the leading role in the church's season of Advent is the one person who you would never invite to your office Christmas party, and that is John the Baptist.

That is who welcomes us to church this morning. In our gospel reading from Luke chapter 3, this sober and awkward figure living outside of the boundaries of mainstream society, who not only doesn't dress like everyone else, he shows up wearing a strange costume.

The gospel writers go to great lengths to describe John the Baptist's clothing in some detail.

[6 : 06] Because they want you to understand that John the Baptist is wearing his Old Testament prophet costume. And furthermore, it's not just any Old Testament prophet costume.

This is not an off-the-rack Old Testament costume. This is a specially crafted costume designed to look like the greatest of Old Testament prophets, Elijah.

In 1 Kings chapter 1, it describes the prophet Elijah as one who spent time in the desert. If you'll remember, he was fed by ravens, miraculously bringing him food.

And it specifically points out that he famously wore garments of hair with a leather belt around his waist. Elijah was well known for this.

And so when John the Baptist shows up, living in the desert, eating locusts and wild honey, and wearing, as Matthew 3 puts it, garments of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist.

[7 : 16] No one in Palestine dressed like this in that era. Everyone in Israel knew this was not an accident. This is John intentionally dressing like Elijah.

But why would he do this? For 400 years, there had not been a prophet in Israel.

The very last prophet to speak in Israel was named Malachi. That was our reading for this morning. We actually heard from Micah.

Micah, Malachi, they sound similar. But the lectionary reading is from the prophet Malachi. And throughout Israel's history, God spoke to his people through prophets, warning and cajoling them to obey.

But as Israel disobeyed the Lord again and again, eventually, God just stopped speaking to them. He stopped sending prophets.

[8 : 18] And so between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, there were about 400 years of silence. The very last words, the very last things heard before that silence descended came from the lips of Malachi.

Malachi. And like all the other prophets, he called on Israel to repent. He was telling them that the day of the Lord would one day come.

But then listen, here's how he ends. These are Malachi's final words as the last prophet in Israel in the last two verses of the last book of the Old Testament.

Behold, Malachi says, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. I will send to you Elijah, the prophet.

And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Lest I come and strike the land with utter desolation.

[9 : 34] And those are the last words that Israel hears. For 400 years, it's ringing in their ears.

The Lord will one day come, will purify us, will judge wrongdoing, will heal what is broken. And the way that we'll know that the Lord is coming is that Elijah, Elijah, who you remember, did not die, but was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire.

Elijah will return to prepare the way for the Lord. And so when John the Baptist shows up in the desert wearing what Elijah famously wore, announcing that the day of the Lord was at hand, it would be hard to underestimate the electricity that would have been in the air.

All of Israel suddenly realizing, this must be it. This is the Elijah-type figure who was prophesied.

This is the thing that we've been dreaming about for 400 years finally coming true. Even Jesus himself would reassure his disciples that this was, in fact, happening.

[10 : 50] He tells them in Matthew 11 that there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist. And if you are willing to accept it, Jesus told them, he is Elijah.

So one of the reasons that John the Baptist is so important is that by representing Elijah, he forms a bridge from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

John appears in the opening pages of the New Testament like this sort of time travel from of old, stepping out of the mists of the past to speak to Israel in the present in order to say, what has been prophesied is now coming to pass.

The day that you've been waiting for, it's now here. God is going to act in history, and the one who comes after me is going to do it.

But I think we have to stop and ask, given his transitional role, we get why John the Baptist was so important to Israel.

[12:09] But how is John the Baptist important to us? The church calendar gives him such a big role for at least two out of four Sundays during Advent.

Every single year, John is the central figure. If you're not getting enough John the Baptist this Sunday, come back next Sunday. In the church calendar that gives the Trinity only one Sunday per year, giving John two weeks in a row, it's a lot of liturgical real estate.

So why is that? Why does he feature so prominently? What is it that we're supposed to learn? To answer that question, it's helpful to remember that for roughly the first 500 years of the church, the season of Advent was not actually focused on the coming of Christ at Christmas.

The season of Advent was focused on the second coming of Christ. I know that's hard for us to get our heads around because Advent comes right before Christmas.

And to be sure, over time, the season of Advent did begin to include a focus on the birth of Jesus at Christmas. But historically, the primary focus of Advent was always on the second coming of Christ.

[13:39] And this is something that the contemporary church in the West does not focus on very much these days.

The exception is if you happen to grow up like me in a wing of the American church that happened to be very focused on the second coming of Christ.

But in those circles, the focus was not on Christ returning to repair the world, to right wrongs and heal hurts and judge injustice.

Rather, the focus was on Christ returning to take Christians out of the world, to rapture them, to take them up to heaven and to leave the world to fend for itself.

But that teaching, it's an aberration in the history of Christianity.

[14:38] It's not what the global church believes about the second coming of Christ today. It's not what the global church has believed throughout history. What the church has always taught about the second coming of Christ is that it will be the consummation, the completion of what God put in motion in the first coming of Christ.

That when Christ returns, he will right all wrongs and bind up wounds and liberate the oppressed and bring healing to the nations.

When Christ returns, he does not come to snatch Christians up out of the world and take them up to heaven. He returns in solidarity with his creation in order to bring heaven to earth.

And the early church prayed for that day. The early church looked at all that was wrong in the world, all the suffering that still existed, and they said, come, Lord Jesus.

O come, O come, Emmanuel. Intervene. Fix what's broken. Bring relief to those who are suffering.

[15:58] Come and transform this sinful world and bring the full reality of the heavens to saturate every part of it. And we also, I pray like that.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come to Ukraine. And end the suffering of innocent people.

Come to Gaza. And restore what has been lost. Come to Sudan. And end the ravages of civil war.

Come to Washington, D.C. Come to our neighborhoods. To our places of work. To our homes.

And heal. And transform them. The early church prayed for this to happen.

[17:05] And although they believe that no one knows when that will fully happen. And that God is the ultimate agent in history. They believe that in some mysterious way, we also have a role to play in preparing for God to act.

To create the conditions for Christ's return and intervention. In 2 Peter chapter 3. Apostle Peter writes that in the last days, scoffers will say, where is this coming that the Lord has promised?

People were asking about the second coming of Christ. And Peter's reply is this. The Lord isn't being slow in his coming. He's not being slow.

He's being patient in his coming. And the reason he's being patient, Peter says, is so that we have time to enter into repentance.

Which he says will hasten the day of the Lord. It's a fascinating word. He says it will hasten the day of the Lord.

[18:23] Peter says that repentance in some mysterious way creates the conditions for the Lord's work. For God's intervention and ultimately for the second coming of Christ.

Similarly, John the Baptist announced to Israel that the first coming of Christ is also hastened by repentance.

Our text from Luke 3 says that John went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance. Why? In order to prepare a way for the Lord. It is by repentance, John the Baptist preached, that valleys will be lifted. And mountains made low. And crooked paths made straight. And rough places made smooth. And this repentance, in fact, did prepare the way for Jesus.

[19 : 29] Many, many people came out to the desert to repent and be baptized by John. Matthew 3 says that then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to John. And they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. They're pouring out. And so when Jesus comes on the scene ready to teach and heal and bring the kingdom of God close to them, the people were ready to listen. They were ready to receive him. They were ready to respond. And that is no less true for us today. I would wager that there are not many of us here who don't want to receive greater healing and transformation by Jesus in our lives. But just as it was for those who went out to the desert to hear John the Baptist, so it is with us. Repentance prepares us to receive him.

[20 : 43] We're reminded in Isaiah 57. Thus says the one who is high and lifted up. I dwell in the high and holy place. And also I dwell with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit. God dwells with those who have a contrite spirit, a repentant spirit. Here's the problem. Repentance is often misunderstood. It's one of those words that is absolutely freighted with baggage. It carries with it associations of heaviness or shame or legalism or boilerplate confessions and abstract forgiveness. Repentance can often be about ritual or saying words to tick a box. But I want to suggest that true repentance is about an inner posture of the heart that slowly over time creates more space for Christ and actually leads to deeper and more authentic freedom.

[22 : 13] In 1986, it was announced that the world's largest McDonald's was going to open in one of the most famous locations in the center of Rome, in the Piazza d'Espagna at the foot of the Spanish Steps. Right there, 450 seats, largest McDonald's. Well, the thought that a fast food restaurant would feature in one of the most visible centers of Italian culture created an uproar and it provoked massive protest across the entire country of Italy. And one of the results of these protests is that a manifesto was written. And it became a famous manifesto which proclaimed that people have fallen prey to a virus, which the manifesto named as the fast life, which fractures traditions and communities. What we need instead of fast food, it said, is slow food. Food that is grown locally and prepared in that culture style and experienced leisurely and enjoyably with others. And most people mark this manifesto as the birth of what became known as the slow food movement with the snail as its mascot.

[23 : 44] And it had a transformative effect around the world. It helped shine a spotlight on the fact that the best things in life, the most important things take time. They can't be rushed. And I want to suggest that perhaps what we need in the church is a slow repentance movement. A slow repentance movement would recognize that the changes that we need to make in our lives take time. They don't happen overnight. We need more than only words that we quickly say or boxes that we easily check. What we need is time and persistence and faith and community. We need these things to make the rough places in our hearts smooth and to prepare a place that Christ can more easily inhabit.

[24 : 59] The great Orthodox theologian, Demetrius Staniloé writes this. Our self-absorption is like an ocean. And so the road to overcoming it is long. Love is the exit from the shadowy prison of self-preoccupation. But this escape cannot happen all at once. The way is one gradually. Gradually. Repentance, he writes, is the critical eye which isn't fooled by the false pleasures offered by our ego. Repentance stops us from always saying yes to those false callings.

By repentance, he says, God doesn't let us be satisfied with who we already are, but slowly moves us out of the darkness of self-absorption and into the light of love.

John the Baptist came preaching repentance. It was his message to Israel and it is his message to us.

[26 : 14] It is the message of this season of Advent. But repentance is not something to fear. It is not a message of condemnation or shame.

It is an invitation to freedom. It is an invitation to smooth down the rough places in our hearts and to straighten those places that feel misaligned.

It is an invitation to move slowly but persistently. The transformative effects of repentance don't come simply by a word here or a prayer there.

Repentance is a posture that we learn over time. We learn to move things that take up space in our hearts to make room for Christ.

And if we make room, he will come. Even this morning, as we come forward shortly for the sacrament of communion, Jesus will be here.

[27 : 35] He will be drawing close in the bread and the wine in his body and blood. And we can come ready to receive him.

We can come ready for him to fill our hearts. We can come ready for him to respond to even our smallest, slowest steps of repentance.

Amen. Amen.