

I've got a couple of questions for you as we dive into this sermon—so get ready! How many of you know what an apocalypse is? You may be thinking about great and terrible natural disasters, much like what is described in the beginning of our Gospel reading. “There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.” For many, the word “apocalypse” evokes thoughts of the end—calamity, destruction, or even the return of God wiping out life as we know it to make way for the Kingdom of God. Maybe you're even thinking of the Book of Revelation.

This interpretation, however, is relatively recent, popularized in the early 1900s by the Scofield Reference Bible, compiled by Cyrus Scofield. Scofield's work introduced a particular reading of Revelation that attempted to map its imagery onto modern events, leading to concepts like the rapture and a seven-year tribulation—neither of which are actually biblical. I felt like this type of thinking caught fire and grew even more popular in the years when I was growing up in an evangelical United Methodist church.

When we hear the Gospel passage today, we likely have different reactions depending on how we may have interacted with the Book of Revelation in the past or with apocalypticism in general. For me, I cringe inwardly when I see these passages coming up in the lectionary, not because I dislike them, but because apocalypticism is so misunderstood in the popular Christian imagination. I know it's going to hit all of us differently and distract from the one thing that apocalypticism is meant to do: spread hope.

Now, depending on your interaction with apocalypticism, the fact that apocalypticism is meant to engender hope may come as a surprise to you. Personally, I was neck deep in the Left Behind series as a kid, and everything I heard about the end times seemed terrifying. This passage would have been anxiety-inducing, but that is not how it is meant to be. All of that comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of apocalypticism.

The word apocalypse in the Greek means to unveil or to reveal. It is an unmasking of the way things are. This is why Revelation is called revelation. In and of itself, it is not scary, it is not about the end, it is about things which are hidden being revealed. And the primary thing which is hidden is the Kingdom of God. God is giving birth to justice in our world, and apocalypse, by and large, points us to those places where God's justice is coming to fruition. Now that is something to see!

At this point, how many of you are wondering what any of this has to do with Advent? It is the first Sunday of Advent. We should be anticipating the incarnation of God, come to share life with us. Why are we instead hearing from an adult Jesus about the signs and seasons announcing God's coming reign?

Advent is a season lived backwards. We start, not with God born in a manger, but with the vision of a world made whole. This is apocalypse: the unveiling of God's perfect order, and it is something that has always existed in the mind of God. In Jeremiah, we hear of the righteous branch who will establish justice, and we get there, not all at once, but step by step, and not because we are in charge but because God is. The Kingdom of God is coming despite any signs to the contrary. When we see things go awry, when the ground under our feet feels unsteady, God is there pulling back the veil. Apocalypse reveals where our world does not yet reflect the Kingdom of God, and it creates a yearning for the world God has promised.

Advent begins with apocalypse, with the vision of the Kingdom of God because Advent is all about waiting, not the kind of waiting you'd do in a grocery store at the checkout line or in a doctor's office. Not the finger tapping, impatient waiting we do when we have to wait our turn. No, Advent is edge of our seat excitement. It is anticipation. It is getting a glimpse behind the curtain and feeling ready for more. Jesus tells us, "Lift your heads! Your redemption... your reconciliation... is at hand." It is something we do not merely stand in line to get, but something into which God invites us to be a part.

I did not grow up Episcopalian. I'm a priest now, so obviously, there was a lot to like, but one thing I haven't changed since becoming Episcopalian is when I put up my Christmas lights. Yesterday, I was up on the ladder stringing lights on our house, and we put up the Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving. The Advent police are quick to correct me. Christmas starts on December 25 and extends twelve days to Epiphany. It happens at the end of the month. How can you put up a Christmas tree in Advent? Now, if this is the way you do things, if you wait until Christmas Eve and put everything up, that is valid. Advent is not Christmas, and in a world that moves too fast for its own good, sometimes it is better to hold the line and truly wait.

But I also think it's valid to put Christmas lights up now, in Advent, because Advent is apocalypse. It is an unveiling, a revealing of the world made whole. Advent anticipates Christmas, invites us to become a part of that just society where God reigns. We are meant to join in with the God who brings joy. In that sense, decorating early is my small way of participating in the joy and anticipation of God's Kingdom.

This Advent, how might we learn to wait with this kind of hopeful expectation? What small acts could we take to pull back the curtain in our own lives and reveal the world as it's meant to be? Let's join with God in bringing hope, joy, and justice to our world—even now.