

Happy New Year!¹ Yes, I realize we celebrated Thanksgiving only a few days ago. And while it’s not quite time to start singing “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” which by the way, I think the Muppets and John Denver offer an excellent rendition, again, I say, “Happy New Year!” And I really mean it. Happy New *Church* Year, that is. While our secular calendar still has 33 more days until the ball drops, this morning we start a new year in the calendar of the church, beginning with the season of Advent.

So since we are at the beginning of the church year, and at the beginning of the season of Advent, at first glance today’s scripture reading may seem a bit out of place. We don’t hear the usual Advent texts, like John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, exhorting people to prepare for one greater than he. Nor do we encounter the story of the angel visiting Mary or recount the dream of Joseph as an angel reassures him of his plans to wed the pregnant Mary. While our mind’s eye may have begun to sketch images of a sweet baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes amid the tenderness and simplicity of the nativity scene, today’s scripture reading startlingly snaps that image from our minds.

Indeed, we meet a stern, adult Jesus, just days before his death! To meet Jesus at the end of his life as we mark the beginning of Advent may create some dissonance for us. It can be confusing! Through the gospel writer of Luke, we hear Jesus urging his disciples, amid the chaos and upheaval of the 1st century world, to be ready, be alert, be on guard, as they await the of coming of the Son of Man. In this way, today’s scripture is about looking forward to a time of promise in the future. Yet, many Christians today observe Advent and Christmas as a time to look backward to when God became incarnate in the life of a babe in Bethlehem named Jesus. So as we begin Advent, which direction are we to look: forward, to the coming of the Son of Man, as we hear in the scripture; or backward, to the blessed birth of our Savior?

Before we try to answer this question, perhaps we first ought to more carefully examine that strange animal we call apocalypse. Apocalyptic thinking gave rise to the words we hear Jesus speak to his disciples in today’s lesson from the Gospel of Luke. Coming from the Greek word meaning “uncovering” or “revealing,” apocalyptic material often portrays a series of events that are violent and destructive to the known world, that are seemingly otherworldly in nature, and that radically upend the structures of power in life, bringing about a definitive change in the

status quo. Earlier in chapter 21, the gospel writer of Luke describes it this way: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven” (21:10-11). For a group of people that is feeling persecuted in life—people who don’t see any other way out of their oppressed lifestyle—apocalyptic talk was, and quite honestly still is, a way to express belief in a God who will deliver them. In imagining and expressing these dramatic, larger-than-life apocalyptic events, these people find their hope—that despite the persecution and unbearable pain and injustice present in their lives, God will redeem, God will bring relief, and the ways of the world will be irreversibly changed for the better.

1st century Jews and Jesus-followers faced persecution from the rule of the Roman Empire. After Rome’s utter destruction of the holy Temple of Jerusalem, the Empire recognized neither Judaism nor the early formulations of Christianity as legitimate, state-sanctioned religions. Only the emperor could be worshipped as God, no other. So those early Christians in Luke’s audience found a strong light of *hope* in the belief that God would upend the power structures of their world; that Jesus, the Son of Man, would return to them; and that the fulfillment of God’s promises voiced throughout the scriptures and embodied in the ministry of Jesus would occur. Promises of blessing, justice, compassion, peace, love, worth, dignity—promises heard for years by the people of Israel and promises that Jesus built his ministry upon—would be fulfilled and the whole world would be changed.

Apocalyptic rhetoric has continued throughout human history. We continue to find it today. Consider the bestselling book series *Left Behind* and the blockbuster movie *2012*, for example. There is something in the dramatic hopefulness behind apocalyptic images and stories that sharpens our attention. It heightens our awareness. It calls us to be alert, just as we hear Jesus advise his disciples in today’s reading. Apocalypse can destabilize, too, especially when we’re *not* experiencing the underbelly of life; and because it disrupts the status quo, it turns us to examine the disparities of the world that run counter to the fulfillment of God’s promises so fully embodied in the life of Jesus.

And certainly the Christmas season that now stretches before us more apparently shines a spotlight on these disparities. We hear of food pantries seeking fully stocked shelves to feed growing numbers of unemployed and hungry people. Crass consumerism resides right alongside nativity scenes of a poor, peasant family. When family gatherings turn into family fights, we

sadly tuck more deeply into our pockets desires for forgiveness and reconciliation. We long for the “Silent Night” of peace amid the blaring news reports of war and conflict. And, although much in our culture may resemble the Roman Empire more closely than life as lived by the 1st century followers of Jesus whom Luke addressed, today we *still* long, we *still* yearn, we *still* hope for this world to be changed. Our world with its inequitable distribution of resources, food, and wealth; with its violence and war and corruption; with its pace of life that leaves us panting for breath—yes, our world needs us to continue to hope for and work towards the fulfillment of God’s promises—a radical transformation of the ways of the world: not the literal, physical destruction of the world described in so many apocalyptic fantasies today, but the more difficult, fully embodied and authentic transformation we live to create together—all fueled by hope.

You see, when we take away all the cinematic drama of apocalypse, we find at the center hope—a fragile, delicate, exquisite state of being that holds so much potential, so much power, so much life. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann called hope “a divine power that makes us alive in the world.”² Hope is formative; it holds the possibility for transformation, and the writer of Luke and other 1st century Christians no doubt knew this. We know it, too, by virtue of living day in and day out in the reality of *this* world.

So, let’s go back to that question I asked earlier. Which direction are we to look: forward, to the coming of the Son of Man, as we hear in today’s scripture; or backward, to the blessed birth of our Savior? I think it’s *both*. We look forward to the continued revelation of God’s love and justice in this world, hoping just as our ancestors in faith have done for hundreds of years, that one day it will be fulfilled in ways that radically change the world for the better. Yet we also look backward to the life of God incarnate in Jesus, in the blessed infant’s birth. Jesus’ life provided the clearest example of how to bring about the fulfillment of God’s promises here on Earth. In his ministry and death and resurrection, Jesus not only became the living embodiment of God’s love; he also invited us—indeed, charged us as his followers—to become co-creators in bringing about the fulfillment of God’s promises, doing so through authentic loving relationship with God and each other, participating in the transformation of the world that God has promised. As we reverence, respect, and learn from the life of Jesus (that is, the looking backward part), we understand the heart of apocalypse, the “revealing and uncovering” of hope for the world (that is, the looking forward part). We then can see more

clearly how we co-create that world by choosing creative and positive actions in partnership with God; we see more clearly before us the choice of revelatory hope as a way of being in this world.

As we are poised at the start of a new church year, as we enter this season of Advent, looking backward and forward simultaneously, I want to close with these words about hope from author Wendy Wright. She elegantly captures the essence of this season of Advent, this season of revelatory hope. She says: “There is correspondence between our hearts and God’s. They have imprinted on them the same unimaginable hope, sealed with a promise. The hope is for fullness, for completion, for being one with each other. What that will look like is hidden from us. The end and fullness of all things is known only to God. But,” she continues, “we have glimpses of it and those glimpses stagger us with their inexpressible beauty. We are tormented with teasing reminders by the restlessness of our desires, by the almost painful depth of our longings, by our ardent seeking for something more. Our entire lives are [thus] a vigil, a keeping watch, for the fulfillment of this hope.”³

Happy New Year. Amen.

¹ I own the idea of starting Advent by acknowledging the start of a new year to Council Moderator Shelly Soorholtz. As we closed November’s Council meeting, Shelly reminded us it would be the last one of 2009 by sending us off with “Happy New Year” well-wishes for 2010. I realized that “Happy New Year” was also an appropriate way to start the Advent season as we also begin a new year in the liturgical calendar of the church.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*.

³ Wendy Wright, *The Vigil: Keeping Watch in the Season of Christ’s Coming*.