



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Hope Against Hope

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 28, 2021

The First Sunday of Advent

Based on Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

*O come, O come Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel*

I bid you welcome to Advent. If you ask Starbucks and Macy's, this season does not exist. They've been decked out in red and sparkles and playing Christmas music since Halloween. But for Christians, this season matters. It's a season of anticipation and intensity, white hot with fierce judgment and a keen yearning for the coming savior.

Just look at [today's gospel](#). Luke comes blazing out of the gate with a text that can be described with one word: apocalyptic. Scholars will tell you an apocalyptic has two parts: part 1 reads the sign of the times, names how the power of evil has taken hold. Part 2 swings around and says the coming tribulations are not the end. They're actually the birth pangs, the prelude to truth, justice and goodness. They're necessary to destabilize and humble humanity, and to remind us of the Holy One we need most.

Luke covers all those bases in today's gospel. He warns that "People will faint from fear" and "the heavens will be shaken." My favorite modern translation, *The Message*, renders it in even more stark, vivid language: *It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth and sea in an uproar, and everyone all over the world in a panic; the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom; the powers-that-be quaking*. Back when Jesus spoke these words, folk would've been nodding and yelling "amen." "Everything around us *is* collapsing. The Empire *is* winning. Is this the way it's going to end?"

But Jesus—our wise savior—he said no. He made the apocalyptic turn. He warned them: after you see the signs and terrors, after the forces of destruction seem to eat away at everything you held dear, do not go numb or hopeless. Do not hate as others hate. Do not let the bitterness swamp you.

Because—and here I'm reading again from *The Message*—"Then—then!—they'll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!"

Advent is all about yearning and hoping against hope. Week after week, we'll hear texts that take us to the gates of hell and remind us how desperately we need Emmanuel, God with us, to come and make all

things new. Week after week, we will sing “O Come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” When we do, we open to the yearning and cry out and look for Jesus, because we know that we have reached the end of our human capacity. We need God to come and inhabit this world again, inhabit us again, with a power and a love stronger than even death.

This is seriously countercultural stuff. Wes Howard Brook says as much in an article in *Sojourners* magazine. He claims that, "For many Christians caught up in the mindset of our secular world, the idea that God actually is capable of breaking into everyday reality, with strength and justice, is embarrassing."

I think he's right. But I also know why. Who wants to be the irrational one claiming that in Christ, God has already touched and reconciled and redeemed this mad, cruel world? Who wants to proclaim that we're waiting, hoping, counting on God?

But you know what? People need to hear it. My generation and those who've come after us, we're the first in this country to come up without much sense of God. Yet, we feel the chaos, loss, fear that make up part 1 of the apocalyptic narrative. Will somebody please share part 2: the hope, the power, the love that we find in God alone?

Remember when our Presiding Bishop preached on the power of God and the way of love at that Royal Wedding? That message resonated far beyond what anyone imagined. Not just because of his preaching prowess, but because people want to join up with this God who is loving, liberating, life-giving. People want to stand and respond to that hope for themselves.

I think of the hope that carried my ancestors through every misery imaginable, heads high, backs unbroken, spirits true. The spirituals they sang aren't just music. They're a record of how we prayed our way through, and that's why I sing and pray them today. They called, "Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on, hold on," and they knew "I'm a gonna eat at welcome table one of these days." Our ancestors weren't misguided or naive. In Christ, they stood and held onto hope in a mad, cruel world.

I think of Ernest, a young man I knew in Boston, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. Most of his family was slaughtered, but he managed to escape; and finally, miraculously, he found refuge in America. And then he got connected with a local church and with faith-based community organizers, all of whom believed in him and nurtured his gifts. And he founded a Rwandan Healing Center for other survivors. Haunted by memories of unbelievable human depravity, Ernest lifted his head and hoped.

I think of the countless gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered folk who've stayed in churches that for so long ostracized them, hated them. Thank God for you, my LGBTQ siblings, because you kept on keeping on and believing. Thank God that you have prayed and believed a new world could be born. Under the weight of suffocating oppression, you have stood and lifted your heads and hoped.

I think of the justice system finally delivering justice for Ahmaud Arbery. Three White men hunted and lynched that young man. Forty or even twenty years ago, they likely would've walked. But this week, a nearly all-white jury said "NO" and punished them.

I know that Jeremiah declares "a righteous Branch will spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." Well, we saw that justice on Wednesday, and it gave us a special reason to shout and give thanks on Thursday. Now it's a shade easier to lift my head and imagine the redemption of a nation. Now we can hope just a shade more.

And yes, I think of Jesus, a poor, tiny baby in Nazareth (and what good can come out of Nazareth?!). But that baby grew into a boy who grew into a man, a man who shone the light of God into every deep valley

and crevice. And when the grave took him low, he rose with the brightest resurrection life imaginable. How can I not hope, knowing he has come and is coming to life again, in us?

There are so many extraordinary and ordinary signs that God has not abandoned the scene, that despair will not have the final word, that the power that turns all things toward wholeness is still pulsing in the world. Yes, part 1 of the apocalyptic is all around. Yes, a new variant of the covid virus looms. Lift up your heads. There is a part 2. Yes, mass shootings happen so often now we can hardly keep count. Stand up. There is a part 2.

Evil won't always win the day. God will have the final say. So reach for God. This Advent, let yourself sing, "O Come, O come Emmanuel" like you never have before. Let yourself bow low in need. And then look up, stand up. Trust that he is coming. Trust that he is here.

Amen.

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ⁱ Howard-Brook, Wes, "Apocalypse Soon?" *Sojourners*, January-February 1999, https://sojo.net/magazine/january-february-1999/apocalypse-soon?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9901&article=990122&mode=sermon_prep&week=B_Advent_1.