

Sermon - 12/2/18
Advent 1 Meditation
Luke 21:25-36
Davidson College Presbyterian Church - Davidson, NC
Scott Kenefake, Interim Pastor

As you know, this was the worst year on record for California forest fires, with two of the largest raging out of control for weeks in mid-November. Those fires killed at least 88 people, forced the evacuation of tens of thousands, cost billions of dollars in firefighting expenses, and spread smoke so toxic that residents in cities a hundred miles away were encouraged to don masks or stay inside.

As *apocalyptic* as these events were, they represent the “*new normal*” in California. The ferocity and extent of the fires have been increasing for decades, and with the climate getting hotter and drier, the trend is almost certain to continue. The advent of a perpetual fire season in California matches the predictions of climate scientists. As global temperatures rise, so too do risks for extreme weather events, including the prolonged periods of heat and drought that make the California vegetation combustible.

On the Friday after Thanksgiving the U.S. government quietly released a report by 300 federal scientists that underscored the climate-related threats to Americans’ health, security, and economic life. The report predicts the warming of the planet will bring more massive fires in the Southwest, crop failures in the Midwest, and widespread breakdown of roads, bridges, and pipelines from severe flooding and storms. For the scientists, the rapid pace of climate change is stunning. “*We are seeing the things we said would be happening [in the future], happen now in real life,*” said Katharine Hayhoe of Texas Tech University, one of the authors of the report.¹

Let’s think about this in terms of the Gospel text for this first Sunday in Advent. It is not about joyous anticipation or eager expectation—the things we usually associate with this season. Rather it is about end times, horrific natural disasters, and cosmic upheaval. With the heavy gloom and doom of its apocalyptic language, it seems about as fitting for a church decorated with an Advent wreath as Picasso’s *Guernica*—his troubling portrayal of war—would be. It is unsettling, gruesome, and frightening.²

How, then, should we understand such texts?

Try this: treat them like the *poetry* they are.

We don’t attend poetry readings to demand literalist interpretations of presented works. We listen with our ears and our bodies and our memories and our hopes as words wash over us. Sometimes connections are made, and *authorial creativity* is furthered in the hearer. Some images dredge up deep, unprocessed pain. Some turns of phrase delight us and remind us of the unrestrained joy that is often ours as human beings dwelling upon this good earth.

We let poetry *be*. We let poetry *do*.

¹ The Editors, *Signs in the Fiery California Sky*, The Christian Century, November 29, 2018

² Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice*, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, 2012, p. 4

So, let the apocalyptic be what it is. Don't tamp down its hyperbole. Don't run from its fanciful and frightful elements. There is much of the fanciful and the frightful in the contemporary moment. You all are equipped to deal with this rhetorical reality. Trust your instincts. Trust the Spirit.

Let apocalyptic do what it does. Let it challenge *reason*. Let it midwife *questions* of what is possible and what is impossible. Let it escort us to that lovely, liminal space where prose bows in humble adoration of the poetic.

Billy Collins, poet laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003, deserves an endowed chair in homiletics and hermeneutics (preaching) for his poem *"Introduction to Poetry."* The speaker describes ways he asks students to consider a poem—as a beehive to listen to, as water to ski across, as a dark room in which to feel around for a light switch. *"But all they want to do,"* writes Collins, *"is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it."*³

William H. Lamar IV, Pastor of *Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church*, in Washington, D.C., put it this way: *"Let's not torture a confession from the sun, moon, stars, and earth in Luke 21. Let the sea roar. Let the earth shake. Let the image of the coming Human One strengthen belief at a time of fainting hearts and equivocating faith. Listen to 1,000 sprouting fig trees declare that God's coming is as reliable as spring yielding to summer."*⁴

In other words, don't tie this strange, beautiful, apocalyptic imagery to a chair with the frayed rope of explanation. Let it *be*. Let it *do*.

Poetry still works.

As Diana Butler Bass has said: *"Part of the problem with end-times theology is that western people see time as a line. We think in terms of beginning, middle, and end. Thus, to consider the "end times" is to anticipate the end of the world-as-we-know it, such as a universal devastation on the scale of the Mayan calendar ending in 2012, when history will cease to be. But the biblical texts of Advent point in another, more mysterious direction—that time is not a line. Rather, time is held in the being of God. Indeed, time is timeless. Think about it for just a moment: What do the divisions past, present, and future really mean? When does the present slip to the past? When does the future arrive? When is the now of the present? Isn't time much more of a wonder, a spiritual or philosophical question, than a line?"*⁵

Which brings us back to those *signs in the fiery California sky*.

In Advent the church ponders apocalyptic texts that refer to *"signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars"* and *"distress among nations"* and a judgment that will be like a *"refiner's fire."*

Climate science is *apocalyptic* in the biblical meaning of the term, for it reveals *fundamental truths*. It reveals the delicate, intricate balance of the natural world and humanity's place in it while exposing humans as fatally prone to pursue our short-term interests over the well-being of others, even our own children.

³ William H. Lamar IV, *Let the Apocalyptic Be What It Is*, *The Christian Century*, November 30th, 2018

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Progressives, Advent, and the End of the World*, *Huffington Post*, February 1, 2013

Climate science is also apocalyptic in yet another biblical sense: it contains a seed of *hope*. It reveals the truth, as bleak as it is, so that people might still *change their ways*.⁶

Let us pray ...

Because of You,
 Fulfiller of promises,
 we come to know
 the way to Bethlehem,
 where justice is born
 to a shunned family,
 where the riches of Your love
 are born into poverty.

Because of You,
 Sign of our redemption,
 grace sprouts hope
 in the winter of our despair,
 goodness overcomes evil
 in the streets of our cities,
 love transforms hate
 in the hardest of hearts.

Because of You,
 Abnegator of our fears,
 we are taught to pray
 in the shadows of our worries,
 and to trust that Your peace
 is preferable to
 those easy prejudices
 sold on every corner.

Because of You,
 God in Community, Holy in One,
 we will be led in this holy season
 to the place of our *hope* and redemption.⁷

(a brief time of silence ...)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Thom H. Shuman, *Lectionary Liturgies*, Advent 1 2018