

# Open Your Eyes to God's Gifts

I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

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My favourite band since I was in high school has been R. E. M. This fall they announced that they are disbanding, amicably, after thirty years as maybe the most influential American rock band.

One of their early hits, and the song which always concluded their concerts, was "It's the End of the World As We Know It." It began with an almost incomprehensible jumble of words in the first verse. I think only this week, googling these lyrics, do I now know what I've been listening to all these decades:

That's great, it starts with an earthquake, birds and snakes, an aeroplane -  
Lenny Bruce is not afraid. Eye of a hurricane, listen to yourself churn -  
world serves its own needs, regardless of your own needs. Feed it up a knock,  
speed, grunt no, strength no. Ladder structure clatter with fear of height,  
down height. Wire in a fire, represent the seven games in a government for  
hire and a combat site. Left her, wasn't coming in a hurry with the furies  
breathing down your neck. Team by team reporters baffled, trump, tethered  
crop. Look at that low plane! Fine then. Uh oh, overflow, population,  
common group, but it'll do. Save yourself, serve yourself. World serves its  
own needs, listen to your heart bleed. Tell me with the rapture and the  
reverent in the right - right. You vitriolic, patriotic, slam, fight, bright  
light, feeling pretty psyched.

And then the really catchy chorus, the part everyone could sing along with:

It's the end of the world as we know it.

It's the end of the world as we know it.

It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine.

Of course, it is always the end of the world as we know it. Human civilization moves on, culture changes, technology advances, institutions rise and fall. Things that were common and popular even five to seven years ago are out-dated now. We move at a very fast pace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But this end-of-the-world talk reveals something deeper – a longing for a sense of meaning and wonder, a hope that behind the events of history and nature there is something at work.

Back in the first century, Jesus proclaimed his apocalyptic vision of how the world would

come to an end. Our adult forum over the last month explored, through historical analysis, Jesus' role as an apocalyptic prophet. Did he really believe the world would soon come to an end, and if so, what does that mean for how we can interpret his life and teaching today? That's a great topic, but not my primary concern this morning.

Apocalyptic literature arises from a powerful human longing and has a deeper purpose than predicting the end-of-the-world. "Apocalypse" means "revelation." It is about lifting the veil to reveal what is hidden. The purpose of apocalyptic literature, then, is to raise the curtain on human history and cosmic processes to expose what is really going on behind-the-scenes. It's like Toto tugging at the curtain to reveal that the Great and Powerful Oz is really an old man from Kansas.

In Judeo-Christian apocalyptic, the curtain is lifted to reveal that behind-the-scenes there is a contest between good and evil and that God is sovereign and will bring about God's reign in the fullness of time. Now, fullness of time needn't mean some historical end point. I happen to believe that fullness of time is available to each of us every day. My sermon last week suggested how we can live into that fullness every day.

Jesus' listeners were troubled by the historical realities of their day. They were occupied by the Romans. They were heavily taxed. The Temple may not have been meeting their spiritual needs. Jesus proclaimed that all these troubles have cosmic, spiritual meaning and that, ultimately, God's reign would come and could be experienced even in the present moment. Apocalyptic, then, isn't supposed to frighten us or make us anxious. It is supposed to do precisely the opposite. It is supposed to comfort us that the exigencies of our time are part of a deeper, meaningful world and that we can tap into that power and glory. If the current, troubled world is coming to an end, we should feel fine.

Now, what does any of this have to do with preparing for Christmas? Isn't that the purpose of the four weeks of Advent? Yes and no.

Every year the scripture lessons assigned for the First Sunday of Advent include this apocalyptic vision. In that way the First Sunday in Advent ties into last week, Reign of Christ Sunday, by presenting the church's eschatological vision -- our hope for the end-of-time, or the fullness of time. In a recent interview Michael Stipe, the lead singer of R. E. M., speaking about the band's catalogue said, "It's that cyclical thing that the end is the beginning, the beginning is the end." That's what the church year does as well. It cycles from beginning to end and back again, reminding us that the end -- the goal, the purpose, the dream -- is the beginning, and the beginning -- the source, the origin, the creation and birth -- is the end.

Advent has always had this bipolar aspect. Near the end of the fourth century, along the missionary frontiers of the Christian church, in the wilds of northern and western Europe, Advent first appeared as a worship tradition. Advent was a season of penitential preparation, a fast, much like Lent. Though it wasn't preparing for Christmas, which was not an important festival yet. It was in preparation for Epiphany, which was, for a long time, the bigger feast day for Christians. Epiphany was also when folk were baptized, so Advent was a time of baptismal preparation and spiritual discipline. This Advent tradition was focused more on preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus and the end of time.

But, there was another Advent tradition. Developing in the sixth century in Rome, Advent was a preparation for Christmas. Roman Advent tradition was always festive and joyful

and was focused on celebrating the incarnation, the birth of Jesus.

The two traditions were not merged until the thirteenth century. Medieval practice was to focus on four themes during Advent – death, judgment, heaven, and hell. More recent practice focused on hope, peace, joy, and love. We continue, in the twenty-first century, to live with this varied tradition as we approach this worship season.

Last July we tried a very congregational experiment in worship planning. We held an adult ed First Forum with the theme “Anticipating Advent.” That Sunday morning we went over the history and purposes of Advent, read some of the assigned scripture readings for this year, and then discussed. That conversation, which was open to everyone, generated this year’s theme. The staff and the Worship Ministry then took all the ideas shared in that forum and used them to design our worship services.

In that forum the discussion quickly turned to the questions, “How are we as progressive Christians supposed to treat these stories? How are we supposed to celebrate Christmas?” Then Nikki Zimmerman posed the question which guided all the rest of our Advent worship planning and design – “How do we as contemporary, progressive people prepare for an encounter with God?” Advent is about preparation for the birth of Jesus. Interpreted more broadly, the Christian tradition teaches that we should prepare every year, and all the time, to encounter the Christ, who is born anew in us and in the world. If Advent is about preparing to encounter God, then how do we do that? Especially when we have serious questions about what it means to have a divine encounter. And we have serious questions about who Jesus is, about the scriptural stories, and we aren’t even always sure we understand what we are talking about when we use the word “God.”

Guided by these questions and theme ideas, the staff explored the scriptural texts more carefully and kept running into images of sight, as in Mark 13:26, “Then they will see.” And from that we got to the theme “Open Your Eyes.” The texts seemed to be suggesting that one way we prepare is opening our eyes, which, of course, we understand metaphorically. Open our eyes, our ears, our minds, our hearts, our understanding. You get the idea.

Now, open them to what?

We humans seem to have a basic desire for the sacred and the sublime. We want to be awed. We want to encounter mystery. We search for meaning. We enjoy being overwhelmed by beauty and majesty. Philosophers have identified this search for the holy which underlies all religious experience. And this basic human desire has not been lost as humanity has become better educated, more secular, and more able to explain natural phenomena. In fact, if anything, our desire for deeper and richer spirituality has actually grown in recent decades.

The First Sunday of Advent suggests that we must lift back the curtain of the times in which we live to see what is really going on. In the midst of anxieties, fears, and uncertainties, if we look carefully enough, we can see hope, promise, and possibility. This fits well with winter. In this dark, cold, colour-less season, we can catch tiny glimpses of life and colour and hope. There is the green of the evergreens, the colours of the poinsettias, and the lights. On a cold and dark wintry night, one can go outside and look up and behold the stars in all their glory and majesty.

Despite all our fears, our doubts, our skepticism, there is something beautiful,

wonderful, grand, and sublime at work in our world. We have only to open our eyes to it, to engage it with a sense of awe and wonder. Maybe it is this beautiful, sublime something which we can also call “holy,” “divine,” “God.”

To encounter it, then, we need only develop the habits and the skills of tuning ourselves to it. In I Corinthians, Paul writes that we are “not lacking in any spiritual gift as [we] wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Seeing these gifts involves taking the time to appreciate the good and the beautiful and the true which surround us every day. In the colours of a flower, in the cosmic majesty of the night sky, in the smile of a child, in the caring touch of a loved one, in our own acts of kindness and charity and generosity.

My suggestion to you, this Advent, is to make sure you pause every day and really appreciate some moment of goodness, truth, or beauty that you encounter. And if you reach nightfall and haven’t, then go outside, if it isn’t too cloudy, and look up. Or get on-line and pull up the deep space pictures from the Hubble telescope. It is dazzling, beautiful, glorious. It just may be that in these moments you will discern something deeper, something sublime, something preparing you for an encounter with . . . dare I say it . . . God.

This Advent, I invite you to explore the question “How do you prepare for an encounter with God?” You can probably guess that here at the church we won’t be supplying answers to that question so much as providing ways for you to explore it for yourself. Let us join together in this journey of exploration. Open your eyes!