

# The Hopes and Fears of All the Years

Revelation 1:10-19

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30 November 2014

Every year the Gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent is something similar to the Mark passage that opened today's service—a prediction of the end of the age, the Day of the Lord, the Second Coming. They are dark and foreboding passages about signs and wonders in the midst of violence and suffering. It is a reminder that the season of Advent is not simply a time to reflect upon the sweet and romantic images we cherish of the Nativity. If God is coming into the world in a new way, it will be to save us from sin and evil. It will be to shine a light in the darkness.

The church staff usually gathers in the summer in order to plan Advent and pick our theme for worship. This year we gathered in early August. And in early August one couldn't help but be struck by how much the Mark passage resonated with the world situation.

The Islamic State was waging brutal war in the Levant. There was civil war in the Ukraine, and a jet liner had been shot down. There was war in Gaza. China was infringing on the territorial waters of its neighbors. Ebola was spreading across West Africa. Boko Haram was kidnapping schoolgirls. Michael Brown had been shot by a policeman in Ferguson, Missouri and protests erupted. The relationship between the United States and Russia was deteriorating quickly. I remember having conversations in which the question was seriously posed and discussed, "Will historians look back and say that World War III began in the summer of 2014?"

Coincidentally, I had begun reading Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. It's one of the great theological works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and I had never read it. Niebuhr was the greatest American theologian of the century and maybe the last great American public intellectual, widely read and influential far beyond academic theology and the church. He was also part of our tradition, a member of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and, thereby, the leading theologian of the United Church of Christ when we were formed in 1957.

The major thesis of Niebuhr's work is that even if individual human beings can overcome sin and live a moral life, it is far more difficult for societies. Societies are far more likely to be immoral. His theology was called "Christian realism." "Christian pessimism" might have been more fitting. Here is the opening paragraph of the book:

Though human society has roots which lie deeper in history than the beginning of human life, men have made comparatively but little progress in solving the problem of their aggregate existence. Each century originates a new complexity and each new generation faces a new vexation in it. For all the centuries of experience, men have not yet learned how to live together without compounding their vices and covering each other "with mud and with blood." The society in which each man lives is at once the basis for, and the nemesis of, that fulness of life which each man seeks. However much

human ingenuity may increase the treasures which nature provides for the satisfaction of human needs, they can never be sufficient to satisfy all human wants; for man, unlike other creatures, is gifted and cursed with an imagination which extends his appetites beyond the requirements of subsistence. Human society will never escape the problem of the equitable distribution of the physical and cultural goods which provide for the preservation and fulfillment of human life.

(And he doesn't get any cheerier after that.)

So, when we gathered to plan this Advent, we were all in rather cynical and pessimistic moods, as was much of the rest of the country. The news hasn't improved significantly since August. If we are less anxious and uncertain, it is only because we've gotten a little numb to all the bad tidings.

What we need is a word of assurance. A reminder that there is light in the darkness. We need to hear again those ancient words, "Be not afraid."

Therefore, we decided that this Advent we'd draw from the Book of Revelation.

That, of course, may surprise you. On the face of it, Revelation doesn't seem to be the sort of thing we'd normally be into for Advent.

But, if you were here in 2010 and can remember, it might not surprise you as much. Because when I came here for my candidating weekend, the week in which many of you met me for the first time and then voted to call me as your pastor, I chose among that Sunday's lectionary texts to preach from the Book of Revelation. I still remember the phone call with Stephen to plan the worship.

"Stephen, looking at all the lectionary texts, I think I'm going to preach the passage from Revelation."

He laughed nervously, "Are you sure about that?"

"Yeah, I know it's risky, but that's one reason I'm drawn to the idea of doing it. No reason to play it safe and preach on the love of God from the John passage."

"Okay," he said. And his tone of voice betrayed that he still wasn't sure.

It appears that the risk worked, however.

This book was written toward the close of the first century of the Common Era, at a time when the fledgling Christian churches were faced with persecution. The might of the Roman Empire had been turned against them, particularly in the area of Asian Minor that was the setting for this book. Rome was demanding a loyalty to the empire that extended into the religious beliefs of the people. Because the Christians refused to participate in the religious life of the Empire, they were suspect.

Scholar Eugene Boring explains the situation this way, "When they became Christians they had not expected it to cost them their reputation, jobs, freedom, or life; and so [some] cursed Christ and bowed before Rome."

John, the author of Revelation, writes to his fellow Christians and states his own solidarity with them in the time of persecution and domination. Tradition has it that he was himself exiled onto the island of Patmos for his religious faith.

This book, then, for all its strange and sometimes frightening images, is a pastoral letter. It is written to the people to provide them consolation and encouragement during dark, dangerous, and uncertain times. In other words, it seems pretty fitting for our contemporary situation.

Here in the first chapter, John shares his vision. On a Sunday morning he was lost in prayer and worship when he heard a voice and beheld an image. Bright light from flames and stars dazzled John. It was an image of radiant glory. An image of incredible light that could overcome any darkness.

It was also a cosmic image, suggesting great power and majesty.

He was overwhelmed and fell down as if dead. And then a hand reached out and touched him gently and a voice spoke. I imagine that unlike earlier the voice wasn't blaring trumpets or crashing waves, but was a calm and assuring, full of authority and grace.

"Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades."

The risen Jesus appeared to John to reassure him. I am the beginning and the end of history and creation. I am with you no matter what happens. I have already defeated death. I control the cosmic order. We are already victorious.

Jim Wallis tells a great story about a worship service he attended in South Africa during the apartheid years. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was in the middle of his sermon, when suddenly the doors of the cathedral opened and in marched the South African Security Police. There were more police than worshippers, and the police surrounded the room, filling the aisles. They began to record who was present.

Tutu looked at the police and then said, "You are powerful, very powerful. But I serve a God who cannot be mocked! Since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!"

Jim Wallis writes about what happened next:

[Tutu] said it with a smile on his face and enticing warmth in his invitation, but with a clarity and a boldness that took everyone's breath away. The congregation's response was electric. The crowd was literally transformed by the bishop's challenge to power. From a cowering fear of the heavily armed security forces that surrounded the cathedral . . . we literally leaped to our feet, shouted the praises of God and began . . . dancing. We danced out of the cathedral to meet the awaiting police and military forces of apartheid who hardly expected a confrontation with dancing worshippers. Not knowing what else to do, they backed up to provide the space for the people of faith to dance for freedom in the streets of South Africa.

As followers of the Risen Christ, ours is not a naïve hope. We are not masses addicted to an opiate of otherworldly salvation. We are not weak and timid people, seeking consolation in some story about the end of time.

No. We are confident, hopeful, realistic people because we believe that if the world is ever going to get any better, then we cannot resign ourselves to the darkness, we must look for

the light, nurture the light, live into the light.

Goodness and Truth and Beauty. Joy and Peace. Justice and Love. These are more powerful than Ebola. More abiding than racial injustice. More glorious than War. Eternal and everlasting. They were the beginning, and they are the end. And Jesus has the keys.

So, my friends, as we await the Advent of God once again, waiting in the midst of dark and dangerous times. The ancient stories encourage us as they have encouraged so many before.

Be not afraid.