

Reconstituting the World
 Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
 The First Sunday of Advent, (Dec. 1) 2024
 Kyle Childress

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
 so much has been destroyed*

*I have to cast my lot with those
 Who age after age, perversely,*

*with no extraordinary power,
 reconstitute the world.*

-Adrienne Rich

Today is the beginning of Advent, the beginning of a very holy time in the calendar of the church around the world, but also probably one of the most confusing Sundays of the church year. To start with we come in the door still in the full throes of Thanksgiving, but the pre-Christmas frenzy is already underway. Here we see somber purple, and one candle lit but tonight while out driving we will see houses brightly lit with green and red lights and Christmas trees and fake deer outlined in white lights in the yard. Here we are up front about pain and grief and loss and yearning and hope while out there, there is no time for grief and loss and yearning. Out there the image is that everyone is happy; but we know better than that here. Here we sing somber hymns about waiting and watching and preparing but out there in every store, no matter the kind, we will hear, "Have

yourself a merry little Christmas,” and “Frosty the Snowman.” Here we say, “Wait!” “Listen and watch,” and “Repent and prepare,” while out there it is anything but wait, listen, and certainly not repent.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not advocating some kind of world-denying, austere life this time of year. I am just reminding us that as Christians, that Advent takes work. It will not come easy, and the world knows nothing of what we’re about and therefore we won’t get any kind of reinforcement from the wider world. Advent is a discipline of spiritual practices. The church has learned for 15 centuries that to be ready, to not only celebrate Christmas, but to be ready receive Christ Jesus in renewing ways into our lives, then we must prepare ourselves. And even more, for us to participate the new world breaking into our old world, we need to start practicing now.

More importantly, Advent is constantly asking us about who it is we worship. Do we serve Jesus the Christ, or do we serve mammon, the god of money; the deity of consumer-capitalism? Do we worship the Prince of Peace or the gods of violence, intimidation, guns, and coercion? Do we worship the God who comes to us in a baby born in a cow shed because there was no room in the Inn, or do we worship the gods of innkeepers and governors who close and lock the doors against refugees and pilgrims trying to find someplace safe?

Therefore, Advent is not for the faint of heart. The word “advent” means “coming.” It is the “in between time.” The church proclaims Christ has come. Christ comes. And Christ will come again. Part of the tension is living in the between these comings and learning to watch and be alert for the various ways Christ comes.

Advent says we're in between the old age of Sin and Death and Domination that is passing away, and the new world or New Creation in Christ Jesus, the Beloved Community, that is breaking in. Indeed, in the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ, the New Creation has invaded this old system, with the church being the vanguard of the invasion. Meanwhile, the Powers and Systems of Death and Domination fight a rearguard battle to hold on. And all of this is going on at the same time.

In the early 1900's Richard Strauss wrote the opera *Ariadne auf Naxos* in which two operas are performing on the same stage at the same time. It is totally disorienting and confusing. The first opera is a tragic grand opera based on the Ariadne legend, and as Ariadne laments her grief, she is brusquely interrupted by an Italian *commedia dell'arte* troupe coming onstage with a cast of harlequins, nymphs, and buffoons, performing a completely different opera. The music, characters, and plot of one intrude on the other, interrupting but also interacting with the other.

For the audience, for us, which performance we take to be decisive therefore makes all the difference.

This is Advent.

With a slightly different metaphor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a classically trained musician in addition to his two doctorates in theology before the age of 23, wrote of the Christian life being a polyphony of life, in which several melodies are interacting with one another. Our calling is learning to play in counterpoint, where these independent melodic lines are brought together forming elaborate harmonies. Bonhoeffer believed it essential that we are clear that our cantus firmus – the lead melody in polyphonic compositions – be the love of God

we know in Jesus Christ. In other words, back to our opera metaphor, that must be the performance that is decisive.

[By the way, I do not recommend the new Bonhoeffer movie out. Neither does the Bonhoeffer family and neither do any of the Bonhoeffer scholars and biographers of respect.]

Advent is about these two operatic performances going on at once, the performance of the world and the intruding performance of the kingdom of God, or we might call it the Beloved Community, or the New Creation. For Bonhoeffer's metaphor it is the revealing that multiple lines of music are being played at once. To live the Christian life, to be the church, in this time between the times, means we are interacting with all this at once. But we must be clear with ourselves that the love of God in Christ is the cantus firmus. It is the decisive story that makes all the difference on how we interpret everything else (see Barry Harvey, *Taking Hold of The Real: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Profound Worldliness of Christianity*, pp. 19-21).

In our reading this morning, Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives looking across at the spectacular Temple, symbol of the stability of God and the stability of the world they're living in. But, as you will remember, since we were here just a couple of weeks ago in Mark's version, Jesus turns their world upside-down by predicting the destruction of the Temple and their world. Here in Luke's version, he continues:

"It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, 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.

“And then— then! —they’ll see the Truly Human One 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!”

He told them a story. “Look at a fig tree. Any tree for that matter. When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you that summer is right around the corner. The same here—when you see these things happen, you know God’s kingdom is about here. Don’t brush this off: I’m not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won’t wear out.

“But be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it’s going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don’t fall asleep at the wheel. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Truly Human One.”
(Luke 21:25-36, *The Message*).

Jesus is telling us that one opera is intruding upon another, one story is colliding with the old dominant one, the New Creation is invading the Old Creation, and the Powers of Domination, of Racism, Patriarchy, and Greed who rule the old world are quaking, but they will not give up without backlash and a fight.

Furthermore, the same Powers of Racism and Patriarchy, Domination and Death are destroying the Earth for their own interests, their own profits, and their own power and control.

Therefore, hear the words Jane read a few minutes ago from poet Adrienne Rich: *My heart is moved by all I cannot save:/so much has been destroyed/I have to cast my lot with those/ Who age after age, perversely, / with no extraordinary power, / reconstitute the world* (excerpted from *Natural Resources*).

Our calling is to cast our lot with those with no extraordinary power who are reconstituting the world. That's what we're called to expect and look for at Advent – the reconstitution of the world. That is what is going on with the church as we live in a perpetual Advent – the new world that Christ Jesus is reconstituting is coming and we want to join in. So, we lift up our heads and watch, we look and pay attention and participate when we see evidence of it coming, intruding, intervening.

Yes, Advent tells us that the old temples and the old world is crumbling even as the oppressive leaders take power to hold onto it. Yet, Grace Lee Boggs, an extraordinary movement organizer for many decades in Detroit, wrote, “We are to be creating a new society in the places and spaces left vacant by the disintegration of the old. ...” (*This Sweet Earth: Walking with Our Children in the Age of Climate Collapse* by Lydia Wylie-Kellermann, p. 73).

She goes on, “Every crisis, actual or impending, needs to be viewed as an opportunity to bring about profound changes in our society. Going beyond protest organizing, visionary organizing begins by creating images and stories of the future that help us imagine and create alternatives to the existing system” (Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, p. xxi).

Boggs went on to say, “Another world is necessary, another world is possible, another world has already started” (*Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, p. 194).

Another world has already started. This is the message of Advent. It has started. It is coming. Christ has come. Christ comes. And Christ will come again. And we had better get ready to join up and jump in.

The Apostle Paul told the little community of Christians gathered in Corinth in his first letter chapter 7: “The time we live in is short, (this time between times) so don’t complicate your lives unnecessarily. While we live in this old world, keep everything simple – live ‘as if’ it is all fading away and invest your lives ‘as if’ the new is here” (rough paraphrase I Corinthians 7:29-31).

The late and great Congressman John Lewis echoed the Apostle Paul when Lewis used to say we need to live “as if.” Live as if the Beloved Community was already here. Lewis said, “You live as if you’re already there, that you’re already in that community, part of that sense of one family, one house. If you visualize it, if you can even have faith that it’s there, for you it is already there” (*This Sweet Earth*, p. 70).

Remember the quote from Grace Lee Boggs a moment ago, “Visionary organizing begins by creating images and stories of the future that help us imagine and create alternatives to the existing system.” Advent, indeed, most especially the apocalyptic in the Bible, is about fueling our imagination for God’s alternatives. The imagination of “as if.” The church, Austin Heights, is called to live “as if” the New Creation in Christ has already come, it continues to come, and it will come.

And Jesus tells us to stand up and be ready, be alert, pray, and learn to discern what's really going on. Just because there is a big grand opera performing on the stage of Washington or Austin, does not mean that is the only opera being performed. So, we watch for what God is doing, then we join in that.

I watched an interview of Grace Lee Boggs by Bill Moyers online which was originally done in 2007. She said, "We depend too much on the government to initiate change. Positive change does not start with governments and the Powers-that-Be. They start with the grassroots."

Over the next three Sundays Advent will move us from today where Jesus urges us to look for the signs of what God is doing, to John the Baptist out in the wilderness, away from the centers of power, to a teenaged girl named Mary in a tiny village of Nazareth who will become pregnant, to her giving birth in a cow shed in the bypassed country town of Bethlehem, all the while the government, the Powers-that-Be haven't a clue.

Jesus is telling us to take heart, stand up, and look for what's happening out in the wilderness, in Nazareth, and Bethlehem, and Nacogdoches.

How many stories could be told differently if we learned to look, not from the perspective, of high-profile powerful types, but looked for grassroots organizing, people participating together to make a difference locally? How might our imagination be fueled by stories of common people showing up and standing up?

Twelve years and two weeks ago, toward the end of our annual Christmas caroling, five or six carloads of us drove out on a very dark farm road, then turned off onto a darker dirt road, before stopping at a place that seemed even darker.

Using flashlights we crossed an open gate, gathered in an open spot in the woods, started singing Christmas carols: “Joy to the World the Lord is Come!” “O Come, All Ye Faithful” and many others. Slowly other figures emerged from the darkness with flashlights and a few candles and started singing along with us. About a dozen, then twenty, and eventually around thirty young pipeline blockaders who were camping there and were in East Texas trying to block the tarsands pipeline and herald a new world free from fossil fuels, came and joined hands with us and embraced us, as we sang “Silent Night” together.

Sixty-nine years ago, today Rosa Parks sat on a bus in Montgomery, AL and refused to give up her seat to the White patrons and go to the back. By sitting down, Ms. Parks stood up, a sign that a new world was breaking into the old controlling world of White Supremacy and Segregation. That night, at the FBC of Montgomery, where Rev. Ralph Abernathy was the pastor, the packed congregation stood and sang, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.”

In Chile in 1973, the common people showed up and stood up outside presidential palace of General Pinochet and outside the prison where their fathers, brothers, and sons were imprisoned and tortured. Even though the Pinochet regime looked all-powerful, the people stood and sang the “Ode to Joy” so loudly the prisoners could hear them sing, and Pinochet could hear them, as well. It wasn’t long before Pinochet was out.

During the deepest, darkest days of apartheid in South Africa when the government tried to shut down opposition by canceling a political rally, Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared that he would hold a church service instead.

St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa was filled with worshippers. Outside the cathedral hundreds of police gathered, a show of force intended to intimidate. As Tutu was preaching, they entered the Cathedral, armed, and lined the walls. They took out notebooks and recorded Tutu's words. But Tutu would not be intimidated. He preached against the evils of apartheid, declaring it could not endure. At one extraordinary point he addressed the police directly.

"You are powerful. You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked." Then he flashed his famous smile, and said, "So, since you've already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!"

With that the congregation promptly stood and erupted in dance and song. The police didn't know what to do. The dancing and singing overflowed into the streets. The common people stood, and apartheid fell (see Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*).

Austin Heights, we are called to stand for what at first seems impossible, then it becomes unlikely, and then one day it becomes the reconstituted world. We call it the New Creation in Jesus Christ, and it is coming!

Come join the winning side!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

[Jane concludes by reading, *Mornings at Blackwater*, by Mary Oliver. See below.]

Mornings at Blackwater

By Mary Oliver

*For years, every morning, I drank
from Blackwater Pond.
it was flavored with oak leaves and also, no doubt,
feet of ducks.*

*And always it assuaged me
from the dry bowl of the very far past.*

*What I want to say is
the past is the past,
and the present is what your life is,
and you are capable
of choosing what that will be,
darling citizen.*

*So come to the pond
or the river of your imagination
or the harbor of your longing,

and put your lips to the world.*