

Eco-Justice Commentary on the Common Lectionary for Year C (2015)
Commentary by Dennis Ormseth
Prayer Petitions by Pastor Ingrid Arneson Rasmussen
Hymn Suggestions by David Sims

The First Sunday of Advent in Year C (November 29, 2015)

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalms 25:1-10

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

The readings for the Sundays in Advent stir up afresh our hopes for the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. The narrative here at the beginning of the new church year is a familiar one: we watch the skies for signs in the heavens; we go out to John the Baptist at the Jordan River; we hasten with Mary up into the hills to find Elizabeth; and we rejoice in Mary's Magnificat. Each part of the story redirects our attention forward into the future from which we expect the coming of our Lord. We are delighted to return to these beloved stories of the season—so delighted, indeed, that we may not notice that the scene in which we wait has shifted, if ever so slightly, with each year's beginning. Because we have been working to discover the meaning and mandate of the lectionary readings for the love and care of creation, however, it has been important to take note how the setting relates to and, perhaps, even shapes the narrative to come. In year A, the readings placed us before the mountain of Zion; and mountains did prove to have a signal place in the unfolding narrative of the year, much of it from the Gospel of Matthew. In year B, on the contrary, we were drawn by Mark's narrative out away from the mountain and its great temple to the river Jordan, to await Jesus there, a reorientation that persisted throughout the year, as the meal gatherings of Jesus and his followers replaced the temple as the lens for our relationship both to God and to God's creation. And so also now in Advent of year C, the Gospel of Luke sets the scene in its special way.

Our attention is directed immediately in the Gospel for this first Advent Sunday to the heavens, to "signs in "the sun, the moon, and the stars," but also to the "distress among nations" who are "confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves" (21:25). The entire cosmos, it seems, is stirred up in anticipation of the coming of the Son of Man. The scene of this narrative is opened up to include all "the inhabited world" (*oikoumene*) (21:26); as Luke Timothy Johnson observes, "The things now being described no longer concern the history of the believers or the fate of the city [of Jerusalem], but the world-wide experience of humans at the judgment." There is here no "temporal reference or time-table," no reference "to any tumultuous events in Palestine." The signs are not the kind that can be localized, such as "those of wars and revolutions (v.10) or even of "earthquakes, famines, plagues and portents in the sky" (v. 11) or armies around the city (v. 20), but entirely of cosmic events in sun, moon and stars (v. 25), the tumult of the ocean (v. 25), shaking of the heavenly powers themselves (v. 26)" (Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991, pp. 330, Johnson's translation of v. 26). When this takes place it will be seen by everyone, everywhere: it will be as obvious as the budding of "the fig tree and all the trees" that marks the approach of summer (21:28-29).

What accounts for these shifts? We suggest that they have to do with differences in setting and date of the composition of the lead Gospels for each year. In Warren Carter's view (*Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000, pp. 14-16), Matthew was written after the destruction of Jerusalem for a marginal Christian community in Antioch, which might explain the author's interest in mountains other than Zion that are

significant sacred centers in the history of Ancient Israel. In Ched Myers's view, Mark was written on the eve of the revolt that led to the destruction of Jerusalem for a community caught up in that struggle, but seeking to find its way beyond both mere reform and radical overthrow of the political establishment; the great question was the community's "nonaligned" and nonviolent relationship to that establishment (*Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988, pp. 64-87). In Luke Timothy Johnson's view, Luke was written after the fall of Jerusalem sometime in the years between 80 and 100 C.E. for a predominantly Gentile community as an apology for the spread of the Christian movement throughout the Roman Empire (Johnson, pp. 3-10). Now the entire "inhabited world" had become the setting of choice; the sacred mountain lies desolate, allowing for a thorough dispersal of the sense of God's presence, which leads in turn to an intense competition with the gods and sacred centers throughout the empire. The Holy Spirit will in due course be put forward as a primary actor in the combined narrative of Luke-Acts. Although none of these orientations was driven by a specific interest in the care of creation as such, the shift of scene which results does nevertheless provide for significant differences in the orientation of the narrative to the creation, differences which serve to ground our interpretation of the texts of the lectionary in the history of the early Christian community.

What happens here "in the heavens" is, in any case, of special interest for us, along with the response of *all* the nations. The response of the nations, as we noted, will be "confusion" and "distress" (or better, "anxiety," as Johnson translates v. 25). "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the *oikumene*, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (21:26). With this dramatic vision, this first gospel reading of Year C draws us into the realm of the apocalyptic end times or the *eschaton*. While setting aside both the fundamentalist interpretation of such material as a revelation of how the end of time will unfold, and the progressive understanding of it as an expression of hope in prophetic and poetic images by minorities oppressed by the dominant political powers of the first century C. E., we acknowledge that the reading serves to remind us that the Lord who is coming into our lives in this season at the end of the secular calendar year 2015 is the Lord of all time. The contrast between the nations and the community of Jesus' followers is absolutely clear: for the church it will be a time to "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (21:28), a condition of hope and confidence reflected as well in our lessons from Jeremiah 33 and 1 Thessalonians 3. These texts encourage us to be alert, praying for the strength to escape all these things, and to "stand before the Son of Man." "Those who endure, who bear witness, who remain alert in prayer," as Johnson comments, "have nothing to fear from the coming of the Son of Man. For them there is no distress or confusion or dread. For them it is the time of 'liberation'" (Johnson, p. 331). The psalm likewise encourages us to place our trust in God, and the apostle Paul bids us to "abound in love for one another" and to "strengthen [our] hearts in holiness that [we] may be blameless before our God (1 Thessalonians 3:13).

We are thus once again put on notice that Christ's coming into our world entails a radical reversal of the fortunes of the unjust powers that dominate human history, so that God's intention with the creation might at the last be completely fulfilled. People of faith will be oriented anew to the cosmos of which we are members as the creation of God that moves toward completion and even perfection, not on the basis of its own inherent powers, but by virtue of the will of its creator. At the same time, however, it is important to notice that the narrative of the lectionary in Year C opens up to a scene that invites consideration, truly for the first time in human history, of a *global* experience of crisis in which all the nations are called to judgement without exception (Cf. James Gusave Speth's argument in his *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 11-73). Although obviously not part of the author's understanding at the time the Gospel of Luke was written, such is nevertheless the not unimaginable

crisis in this century of the ecology of the earth. If we were to adopt this vision as an expression of the devastation and accompanying anxiety that would attend the culmination of our comprehensive destruction of the earth and its living inhabitants, how might the readings for year C then address us in our anxiety and despair? When we see such things taking place as the global rise in sea temperatures, the worldwide increase in the incidence of storms, the acidic poisoning of the waters of the oceans, and the massive extinction of species both in the seas and on the land, where would we look for the non-metaphorical equivalent of the fig tree and the righteous branch? How might the poetry of the prophets move us to confront our vascillation, in the face of scientific uncertainty, concerning the consequences of our changing of the very material conditions of life on earth? What hope, finally, does the Christian gospel offer a world in such a crisis? What reason do we who fear for the future of planet Earth have to "stand up and raise our heads" at the coming of our Lord and Savior into our lives in the coming year of 2016?

The relevance of these questions for preaching in our context is heightened by the combined publication earlier this year of Pope Francis' pastoral letter *Laudato Si'*, his visit to the United States to address both the United States Congress and the United Nations, and the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, November 30 to December 11, which coincides with the opening of this Season of Advent. It's significant to note that for Francis, the ecological crisis is indeed of global scale: as he sees it, it concerns "what is happening to our common home." His description of the crisis is comprehensive; not only pollution and climate change are of concern, but also the issues of water, the loss of biodiversity, the decline in the quality of human life, the breakdown of society, and global inequality. The weaknesses of political and economic responses heretofore concludes his list of deeply concerning failures on the part of the human community to meet the crisis we face (Par. 17-67; his discussion of these items forms the content of his first chapter; we cite the document, which is available in diverse formats, by paragraph (Par.). His letter is accordingly addressed not just to the Roman Church or even to all Christians, but to all humanity (Par. 3).

In his view, the situation is thus worthy of consideration in the cosmic perspective into which the Gospel reading invites us to place it. Facing the challenges of the crisis requires that we address the most fundamental questions regarding human existence:

What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn (Par. 160).

Not even the language of apocalyptic despair is inappropriate. As he writes,

Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world

The difficulties in which we find ourselves with respect to the environment are only magnified by the "rampant individualism" and "self-centered culture of instant gratification" which undergirds habits of "impulsive and wasteful consumption." (Par. 161).

Is there then no reason for hope? The question is central to the urgency of dealing with these conflicted issues in a season commonly given over to joyous celebration, when congregations have precious little inclination for raising them while preparing for Christmas. But the texts for this Sunday compell us forward. As we noted above, the contrast between the nations facing crisis and the community of Jesus' followers is absolutely clear: for the church, it is a time to "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (21:28); the texts, which invite a condition of hope and confidence, encourage us to be alert, praying for the strength to escape all these things, as we "stand before the Son of Man."

Indeed, is there any better season than Advent to raise these concerns, dominated as it is in our secular life by the most aggressive and beguiling expressions of consumerism? It is important to note in this connection that in Francis' view, what the Christian community has to offer in the crisis is entirely in accord with the true "spirit of the season." Basic to Christian spirituality, he writes in a section entitled "Joy and Peace", is "an alternative understanding of the quality of life" that "encourages a deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption." It

proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. This implies avoiding the dynamic of dominion and the mere accumulation of pleasures (Par. 222).

Thus beyond seeking the "integrity of eco-systems," Francis insists, "We have to dare to speak of the integrity of human life, of the need to promote and unify all the great values. Once we lose our humility, and become enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything, we inevitably end up harming society and the environment" (Par. 223). As a time for contemplation of those things that lead to peace, this holiday season can become an occasion for cultivating that "inner peace" which is

"closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life. Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, or the cult of appearances? . . . An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence "must not be contrived but found, uncovered" (Par. 225)

This spirituality offers an orientation that endures even "beyond the sun" whose winter solstice marks the progress of these weeks. "At the end," Francis concludes near the close of his letter,

we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12), and be able to read with admiration and happiness the mystery of the universe, which with us will share in unending plenitude. Even now we are journeying toward the sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, toward our common home in heaven. Jesus says: "I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all (Par. 243).

And in the meantime, meeting our responsibilities for our earthly common home is sustained by the conviction

that all the good which exists here will be taken up into the heavenly feast. In union with all creatures, we journey through this land seeking God, for 'if the world has a beginning and if it has been created, we must enquire who gave it this beginning, and who was its Creator.' Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope (Par. 244; the quotation is from Basil the Great, *Hom. In Hexaemeron*, I, 2, 6: PkG29,8).

Words appropriate for the Season of Advent? Indeed. And there are more to come from *Laudato Si'* in the weeks ahead.

A Petition for the First Sunday of Advent

Even now, our common home is unfolding. The sun is climbing, the seas are churning, clouds are flying. These are signs that, in your love, you are always summoning creation into dynamic life. Stir in us anew; draw us into your perfect movement.

Hymn Selections for the First Sunday of Advent

Title	ELW	GTG	Other
A Thousand Stars			SWMN 186
Above the Moon Earth Rises			SWMN 20
As the Dark Awaits the Dawn	261		
Creator of the Stars of Night	245	84	
God Created Heaven and Earth	738		
Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending	435	348	
Lost in the Night	243		
Now the Heavens Start to Whisper		94	
The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns	260		
To Bless the Earth		38	
Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying	436	349	

Sources:

CH *Chalice Hymnal*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995

EAS *Earth and All Stars: Hymns and Songs for Young and Old*. Herb Brokering. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003. (For Lois Brokering's tune to "Everything Is One", see Augsburg anthem 9781451482898)

ELW *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.

GTG *Glory to God: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

SBL *Sent By the Lord: Songs of the World Church Vol. 2*. The Iona Community, ed. John Bell. Chicago: GIA Publications, 1990

SWMN *Sing of the World Made New: Hymns of Justice, Peace, and Christian Responsibility*. Carol Stream and Chicago, IL: Hope Publishing and GIA, 2014.