

From a Scholar

The sky is sacramental in Advent. When Christians began celebrating the feast of the Incarnation, December 25 was recognized as the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. The early winter fast of Advent—perhaps originally a preparation for Epiphany baptisms—became the season for watching the sky grow darker above while more candles were kindled below.

Martin Luther was fond of Augustine of Hippo’s formulation “The word comes to the element and there is a sacrament.” In this week’s lections, the scriptural word comes to the element of the sky—specifically, the darkening Advent sky—allowing even our scientific-era “heavens” to shimmer with theological significance.

But these are troubled skies. The first lines of scripture in the new liturgical year direct our eyes up to the heavens from a disordered and tired world: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Isa. 64:1). This striking opening line sets the tone of profound need. Below the for-now-closed heavens, Isaiah describes an earth in desperate need of renewal, with images of the people as dried-up leaves in the wind, bodies of clay, dirty clothing. Advent begins with earth creatures pleading to the skies for a radical breakthrough, something that would seem to come from beyond what currently seems possible.

In response to the reading from Isaiah, the psalm also looks to the skies, imploring God three times, “Restore us . . . let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved” (80:3, 7, 19, NRSVue). The psalm’s omitted fourteenth verse extends the imagery of God’s face like a hidden sun in the heavens: “Turn again . . . ; look down from heaven and see.” The psalm is like a plea for the Aaronic blessing: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace” (Num. 6:24-26).

The gospel text from Mark 13 is an apocalyptic panorama of the heavens, evoking the darkened sun and moon, falling stars, the four winds, and the farthest corners of the earth and heavens. But there are hints here of something more: The heavens that are “shaken” (13:25) evoke the torn-open heavens at Jesus’ baptism (1:10) as well as the rending of the temple veil (15:38), itself embroidered with images of the heavens.

Jesus evokes the disordered world and the troubled sky, but his counsel is toward attentive wakefulness and trust in his promises, reassuring us that God’s mercy will stretch out “from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (13:27). This tone of reassurance is beautifully expressed in the second reading from 1 Corinthians. The God we seek from above is with us now in gifts of the Spirit, in Jesus’ suffering with us on the cross, in the waters of baptism, and in the dust far below the dome: “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isa. 64:8).

Benjamin M. Stewart

From a Preacher

We begin the liturgical year in language similar to that with which we ended the last one—with an eye toward God’s ultimate purpose and Christ’s coming in glory. For people accustomed to putting up Christmas trees the minute the Thanksgiving turkey has cooled, this Sunday’s readings can be particularly confusing. No mention of an anticipated birth nor of angelic songs is anywhere to be found. Instead, we live with the cognitive dissonance of toy drives and Christmas songs alongside scriptures that seem to speak more of endings than beginnings.

However you choose to navigate these lectionary readings that are out of sync with cultural expectations, you will find plenty of powerful images. In Mark, the admonition to keep awake is Jesus’ word to his disciples who are about to witness his suffering and death. Being alert but not afraid, watchful but not anxious—these are the postures we are called to as disciples of Christ.

A posture that anticipates God’s purposes is a good way to begin any journey, whether that of Advent or the long progression of God’s story through the liturgical year. Trust in God’s purpose is also the most hopeful posture we can have when facing any ending in our lives. And in between every beginning and ending, we wait and watch for God’s work.

That spirit of anticipation is particularly strong in our gospel text and in Isaiah, as both readings urge us to look up. With eyes raised to the heavens, we can expect God to act in a powerful, visible way. Mark's account of Jesus' baptism echoes Isaiah's plea: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" (Isa. 64:1). And Jesus, as he anticipates his own suffering and death, envisions "the Son of Man coming in clouds" (Mark 13:26). A careful preacher will open up these images to the congregation as poetic calls to hope rather than literal predictions of natural events.

One path to avoiding the ditch of literalism is to explore what the coming of Christ really means. Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century abbot and theologian, said that in Christian faith we wait for *three* advents. The first is the incarnation, the advent we celebrate at Christmas, when God came to us in human flesh. The last is God's advent at the end of the age, the *parousia*. The Old Testament prophets looked for the first advent, the coming of the Messiah, and for the third advent, the one Jesus speaks of as he talks about signs in the heavens and the final arrival of God at the end of the age.

But there's another advent, says Bernard, a "middle" advent. The middle advent is the everyday arrival of Jesus in our lives. Jesus comes to us in these days too. In other words, Jesus is coming again and again every day, like a thousand spring buds on a fig tree. The arrival of God's presence into our everyday lives should cause us to look up, to raise our heads in anticipation and hope, and to refuse to let fear, alarm, or despair rule over us.

No matter how your community approaches the season of Advent, this week you have an opportunity to speak to life's beginnings and endings and to remind God's people that a posture of hope will always bear witness to the God who loves this whole world.

Making Connections

- Our prayers of the day throughout this Advent season begin with the phrase "stir up," asking Christ to come now into our lives and our world. As many people, including children, begin the holiday season by baking special treats, invite them to pray for God to "stir up" their hearts and lives as they use their mixers and baking spoons.
- The image of the blooming fig tree may feel seasonally out of place in some communities. Is there another plant in your community that can signify the hope of a bud about to bloom?
- The 2021 film *Don't Look Up* is a sobering look at the ways our culture responds to crisis, this one literally marked by signs in the heavens. Characters give abundant examples of how fear, distraction, and greed can make us miss what matters most. The final scene offers a brief eucharistic vision.

Pam Fickenscher