
Good Catastrophe: An Advent of Beloved Community

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Isaiah 2.1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13.11-14, Matthew 24.36-44

In the name of God: our Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, and Friend. Amen.

The people of San Francisco are taking up a collection.
"We're tired of waiting," they say.
"If the earthquake won't come, we'll send for it!"

Well, it's a joke of course. It's one of my favorites, so maybe you've heard me tell it before. In fact because I like it so much, and it's so short, and maybe everyone didn't quite get it the first time""-[smile!] Alright, you talked me into it: I'll tell it again!

The people of San Francisco are taking up a collection.
"We're tired of waiting," they say.
"If the earthquake won't come, we'll send for it!"

That's actually a poem; just a three-line poem by noted African American writer, Ishmael Reed. Reed is often ironic, as in this poem where he invites us to imagine an entire city getting so worked up with anxiety that they can't take it anymore. Their anxiety fixates on that catastrophe that's waiting to happen along the San Andreas Fault line; the catastrophic earthquake that will sink most of the state of California into the Pacific Ocean. As the pressure increases invisibly underground, so the anxiety builds up noticeably among the people above ground.

So intense is the pressure that before the catastrophe can even begin, as the poet foresees, the people themselves implode. "If the earthquake won't come, we'll send for it!" they say. And that last line of the poem has to be said with all the bravado and swagger of the tough guy in a Clint Eastwood western: "Go ahead!""and you know the rest of the script:

"Go ahead! Make my day. Bring it on. Show me what you got. Take your best shot. It's a good day to die. I'm ready to go if you are. We eat this stuff for breakfast."

Now if you were performing that Ishmael Reed poem, that's the kind of tone you would need for the last line: "If the earthquake won't come, we'll send for it!" You would need a certain attitude of brashness or gall, but also an element of foolishness or folly. Because it is also, of course, ludicrous to imagine this scene: the people of San Francisco getting together in a fundraising campaign to bring on ""the final big one.' That's what makes it a joke, right?""it's a ridiculous idea.

But like many jokes it has an element of truth in it. That's part of why we laugh at such jokes, isn't it? We recognize ourselves in them, and the recognition gives us a little catharsis; the little catharsis called ""laughing.' And one of the best

antidotes to human folly is laughter" assuming that such laughter really is curing our folly and is not a way of confirming us in our folly; as if to say, I can handle it, ha-ha!

Confirming ourselves in our folly is sometimes called being brazen or unabashed. And it's precisely that kind of brazen folly that leads some people to describe our situation in the world today as "objectively apocalyptic." Apocalypse means "revealing" or "unveiling" specifically, in biblical terms, revealing "the end of the world," as in the Apocalypse of John in the last book of the Bible: the "Book of Revelation."

Now it so happens that in our tradition we begin every church year like this" though not necessarily with jokes or poems. In this first week of Advent we always start with apocalyptic readings from the gospels. On the one hand it seems that the season of Advent is preparing us for our Lord's first coming in the Incarnation or the Nativity at Christmas" and indeed, that is true. But the bigger picture of Advent is our preparation for any coming of our Lord into the world. For the word advent means the "coming" or "arrival" of an important event with a sense of expectation.

Accordingly this season in the church year inaugurates for us a disposition that is really meant to characterize our entire Christian life. It's a life of expectant watching for the coming of our Lord in each and every situation, until we internalize advent expectation as our "normal Christian life." But precisely here the Christian disposition differs profoundly from the ironic poem about the people of San Francisco.

The people in the poem start collecting to bring-on the earthquake because they have become too anxious to keep waiting for it. Christian Advent expectation, on the contrary, is marked by confident hope, not runaway anxiety. It is watchfulness in the service of hopeful expectation. Advent expectation is the spiritual opposite of the kind of dread or terror that increases anxiety to a fever pitch. The danger of such a fever or distemper, of course, is that we are likely to bring about the very catastrophe that we find so forbidding.

Do you suspect such a condition, by the way, among many actors on the world stage today? Does it also seem to you, as others too have surmised, that the anxiety of some leaders is intent upon creating the very catastrophe that they want their actions to prevent?

To the contrary, Advent expectation is intent on creating "eu-catastrophe" instead of mere catastrophe, or instead of mega-catastrophe. The word is spelled beginning with the letters e and u, then the word, catastrophe, and it was coined by J.R.R. Tolkien, the celebrated fantasy author of the trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien created the word by attaching the Greek prefix eu, which means "good, to kata-strophe, which means down-stroke or down-turn" that is, something negative or disastrous. So a "eucatastrophe" is a down-turn that results in some unlikely good. Instead of the mega-catastrophe of our apocalyptic nightmares, "eucatastrophe" results in a good outcome; an outcome that was hoped-for but unlikely to be achieved given the catastrophic occurrences that preceded it.

Thus the trilogy of the *Lord of the Rings* results in the unlikely success of the ring-bearer and of the Fellowship of the Ring, and a miraculous redemption for the peaceable inhabitants of Middle Earth. But for Tolkien the Christian writer, who was also a colleague and friend of that other popular Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, the prototype of eucatastrophes were the Christian gospels. [Source: Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia. The entry for "eucatastrophe" was accessed at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eucatastrophe> by Prof. Theophus "Thee" Smith of Emory University on December 1, 2007.]

In the gospels there are two events that climax Jesus' own experience of eucatastrophe. They are the related events of his crucifixion and resurrection. These are opposite sides of the same divine transaction: the crucifixion is the disastrous down-stroke that, by the grace of God, results in an unlikely good outcome, the resurrection. (That's why "Good Friday," our Lord's death anniversary, is called "good".)

And that expectation of good news is the attitude that we are urged to internalize in this first week of Advent. However objective the apocalypse appears in the news stories, however terrorizing or traumatizing the events of the past year or the present day, we have a gospel of good news that outranks and triumphs over them all. [8:30]

It is that good news that Jesus exhorts us to safeguard and be expectant for in today's gospel. "Safeguard yourself!" he enjoins at the end of the reading, "like a homeowner vigilant to keep your house from being broken into." And "Be

expectant!' he further implores, as if it were "the Son of Man himself coming to you at an unexpected hour.'

How are we to be vigilant to keep our house from being broken into, and expectant as if it were "the Son of Man himself coming to us at an unexpected hour?' Or to ask it differently, what would it look like for us to be robbed as if by a thief in the night, or somehow to miss the return of our Lord himself in our present apocalyptic situation? Well, I'm glad you asked that question! [Smile!] I have been doing my own research on this question in my Emory class this semester alongside my students. And I now have a vivid picture of how we are all at risk for being robbed as by a thief in the night, or liable to miss the return of our Lord himself in the present situation.

We have been studying truth and reconciliation commissions, or TRCs, from South Africa, Eastern Europe, and South America to the recent TRC in Greensboro, North Carolina that was archived on the internet last year. The course is called, "Religion and Conflict: Comparative Truth Commissions from South Africa to the U.S. South." Week after week our students have had the stamina to endure case after case of human inhumanity to other humans. We have surveyed not just genocide and ethnic cleansing, and historic lynchings or and race riots here in Atlanta or elsewhere in the South. We have also examined across the world the most gruesome forms of torture and mutilation, personal violation and trauma, and forms of enslavement and viciousness that we thought were relics of a bygone era not our own.

Perhaps most heartless has been the training of child soldiers who are typically abducted from their villages, drugged and drilled to kill their own people, and afterwards sent back with no one to receive them into community. Because they have so violated the bonds of human relationship and compassion, there is nowhere left for these children to go home to. Lord have mercy! And because they were also victims they cannot be prosecuted for crimes against humanity. In other cases perpetrators of crimes against humanity who can be prosecuted is so numerous that criminal trials would result in locking-up the leadership of an entire society. In such cases, war crimes tribunals would need to be supplemented or even replaced by truth and reconciliation commissions.

It's precisely here that Jesus gives us a specific indication of how we can be robbed as if by a thief in the night. It is found earlier in the same chapter of Matthew's gospel appointed for today; in a passage that precedes today's reading, Matthew 24:12, Jesus says:

Because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But anyone who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.

Advent friends, continuing to love people who increase in their lawlessness is the "good news of the kingdom." Its part of the good news that we must not let ourselves be robbed of as if by a thief in the night. Companions on our Advent journey, we must not let lawlessness and atrocity, and human rights violations and crimes against humanity, rob us of the love of God for each and every human being""however corrupted or demonized they are by history or by circumstance or by their own viciousness.

And why not? Why not simply hate or despise or neglect such persons? Because neither are we so innocent before God and one another. Indeed we ourselves require a great deal of divine mercy and from each other many acts of mutual forbearance and forgiveness. Am I right? I say I'm right! But more to the point, our tradition says that's right.

Now it's true that we also have a unique inheritance among all the world's spiritual treasures and religious traditions: we have this altar and its sacraments. But each time we convene ourselves around this altar we form not an assembly of the self-righteous, but a circle of penitents. Here indeed it might be helpful to remember that Advent is also called "a little Lent,' as we prepare ourselves to greet the Lord's coming with open hearts and purified conscience.

Thus every week at this altar we proceed to purify our conscience as we form a circle of penitence. Here we assemble with the bread and wine the symbolic remains of a sacred victim, and we confess before God and one another that our perennial distemper as human beings""not as Jews or gentiles, but as generic human beings""has conspired to produce such a victim; and conspired to produce the broken bodies and shed blood of the many victims represented here by the virtual body and

blood of our sacred victim, by the bread and the wine.

But then, there is also enshrined in this altar that cross of Christ on which he somehow "bore our griefs and carried our sorrows," as also Isaiah says in chapter 53. And from that cross we hear the word of intercession that our Lord offered for ourselves and for the entire human race: the gracious word of divine pardon, "Father forgive . . ." (cf. Community of the Cross of Nails' "Litany of Reconciliation): "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23.34).

When we can allow that word to penetrate to all the interior places where we harbor un-forgiveness toward ourselves and others, then we find the breath of the Spirit lifting us on the wings of grace and transporting us beyond all that separates us from God and other human beings. With thanksgiving"which is what the word Eucharist literally means"with thanksgiving and euphoria we received the gift of purified hearts and receive as well the bread and wine transformed from sacred remains into the festival food that makes this altar also a banquet table. Thus we communicate and commune with clean hands both with God and one another.

Departing this place in the peace of Christ we go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit to set us free from sin and death. We even find ourselves empowered to fulfill our baptismal vows, to intervene on behalf of all future victims by "respecting the dignity of every human being" (Book of Common Prayer, p. 305.)"no matter how corrupted or demonized.

This is that "good news of the kingdom," to quote again Matthew 24, that must be "proclaimed throughout the world as a testimony to all the nations." And for those of us who are schooled in Christian hope, the "end of the world" is not about apocalypse for the sake of apocalypse. Rather, the end of the world is a eucatastrophe for the sake of such a beloved community. It is the kind of community that Isaiah prophesies for us in this first week of Advent and next; a community, he declares, that is destined by God to become a worldwide, universal community.

2:2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

2:3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD . . .

2:4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

And now, let's imagine a final outcome of all the Advent reflections that you and I have sat through after so many years of Advent lessons and sermons like this one today. Imagine a scene like the people of San Francisco gathering together to summon the great earthquake in the poem I recited a few minutes ago. But this time imagine it is collectively ourselves and our sister churches in this city and around the world who are gathered to respond to the catastrophic events in the world today in the following Advent terms.

[18:30]

I prophesy that collectively our future might look and sound something like this:

"The people of Christ's church are collecting even more tithes and offerings. (That's right: as far as the eye can see into the future we're still collecting tithes and offerings . . .)

"But frankly,' they say, "we're tired of waiting for everyone else to act like beloved community.'

"Until the Second Advent comes, we'll be beloved community ourselves. And you and everyone else who is also willing to purify your consciences, you too are invited to join us in creating beloved community, until the Lord himself comes again.'

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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