

“God's in his Heaven, All's right with the world!”

Advent is a dual time in which we look forward to two events. First it is a time of waiting and preparation for the birth of Jesus. It is something that happened in the past but will happen again in our hearts. That is perhaps the easiest part to grasp. What is harder to grasp is what the church calls us to on the early Sundays of Advent; the second coming of Christ. Depending on how we view the Parousia or end times it can be a time of joy, it can be a time of fear, or a mixture of both.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the prophets called the Parousia “The Day of the Lord.” The Day of the Lord was originally thought to be the day when God when impose the Divine will upon the world and restore the world to its original beauty and order. What comes to mind is a phrase from Robert Browning’s “God's in his Heaven/All's right with the world!”<sup>1</sup> No longer would there be violence, degradation of humanity, poverty, hunger, want, war, lust, or any other of the myriad of sins that people visit upon each other, upon the world, and upon God. The world would be returned to the idyllic days of early Eden.

However, as the theological concept of “The Day of the LORD” was developed by the prophets its aspect darkened. The day of salvation and restoration of God’s world was not just a day for rejoicing but also one to dread. Those who had lived lives of perfidy, corruption, deceit, infidelity, mistreatment of others, and ignoring God’s commands would be called to account on “The Day of the LORD.” Indeed, all society would be judged for its terrible ways. By the time the prophet Joel writes about “The Day of the LORD” he warns the people of Judah saying:

<sup>1</sup>“Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—  
<sup>2</sup> a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains,  
a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
nor will be again after them  
in ages to come.  
<sup>3</sup> Fire devours in front of them,  
and behind them a flame burns.  
Before them the land is like the Garden of Eden,  
but after them a desolate wilderness,  
and nothing escapes them.”<sup>2</sup>

The Day of the LORD is a terrible and frightening day. This is the stuff that fire and brimstone Christian preachers through the ages used to terrify the congregations. It is also the stuff that makes many people think that the God of the Old Testament is a wrathful and punishing God, and that the God of the New Testament, as manifest in Jesus Christ, is the gentle and loving God. Yet, reading



*“Is he the God of the Old or the New Testament this morning?”*

<sup>1</sup> from *Pippa Passes* by Robert Browning, public domain.

<sup>2</sup> Joel 2:1-3 NRSV

today's passage from the Gospels we can see that Jesus was not always sweetness and light. He tells his disciples that the coming of the Son of Man, whom we perceive to be Christ, will be as bad as the flood that destroyed the world in the time of Noah.

Finally he warns us to "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." If we were looking for comfort and peace on this Sunday of Hope, these words of Jesus do not fit the bill. If anything we would feel a level of anxiety that is comparable to Cold War years and the fear of outbreak of nuclear war as portrayed forebodingly in the film "Fail Safe" or satirically in "Dr. Strangelove."<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, it is the God of the Old Testament that gives us hope through the prophet Isaiah. He writes that in the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house (that is Jerusalem) shall become the highest of mountains and a place to which people from all over the world will flock. God will teach from that holy mountain. God will judge and arbitrate between the nations from Zion. Finally, we hear one of the most oft quoted phrases from all of scripture that the people "shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks" and they will not study war anymore.

This reminds me of the spiritual which we sang a few weeks ago but bears singing again. Turn to page 210 in the hymnal *Lift Every Voice and Sing* and let's sing together verse 1.

*I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield  
Down by the riverside,  
Down by the riverside,  
Down by the riverside  
I gonna lay down my sword and shield  
Down by the riverside,  
Ain't gonna study war no more,  
I ain't gonna study war no more,  
I ain't gonna study war no more,  
I ain't gonna study war no more,  
I ain't gonna study war no more,  
I ain't gonna study war no more,  
I ain't gonna study war no more.*<sup>4</sup>

Prepare the way of the Lord in peace, justice and mercy. Trust in the goodness of God and of God's commandments. Follow those commandments with your whole heart. Be awake for the coming of the Lord in glory or in a still small voice. We cannot know which it will be, but if we are prepared in our hearts we will know it when it comes. We will not be fooled by false messiahs or charlatans, because their words will ring like a clanging gong. It is only the true words of Jesus Christ that will ring true and then we will know that we are home.

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<sup>3</sup> Even more ironic is the subtitle to the film "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb."

<sup>4</sup> Hymn 210 from *Lift Every Voice and Sing* ©1993, The Church Pension Fund.