

## Advent 1A

In the book we are studying this year during Advent, the Gospel of Inclusion, the author, Carlton Pearson, spends a great deal of time looking at the concept of “the end times.” The understanding of the second coming of Christ as a day of judgment that has been woven into Christian theology—and especially into more evangelical theologies—for the past two hundred or so years. And with this theological focus has come burning questions like when. When will it happen? Who. Who will be taken up and who will be left behind? It is more commonly referred to as “the rapture.” The time when Jesus will return and gather up the faithful to be taken into heaven while the rest of humanity is doomed to an everlasting hell.

Well, the readings for the First Sunday of Advent present these same themes, but with a lot less focus on the *event* and a lot more challenge to the faithful *person*. First, in the prophet Isaiah, we read about a political cataclysm in the 8th Century before the common era, when the kings of Israel had offered to pay tribute for protection from invaders. To this situation Isaiah proclaims the vision of a new Israel where tribute will be no more because all kingdoms will come to the “mountain of the Lord’s house.” The reading concludes with the vision of universal peace where “they shall beat their swords into

ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”

Anyone reading a newspaper these days would agree we are far from that reality today. But this vision has given people hope for centuries.

In order of time, the next passage written was the Gospel passage from Matthew, part of the apocalypse from this Gospel where Jesus addresses people’s concerns about the end of time. He does this, incidentally, from the Mount of Olives where he is about to face his own life’s end as he begins his time of arrest, trial, and crucifixion. It’s important to remember when reading this passage, then, that Jesus was certainly very much aware of what might happen to him as he spoke and what the next few days might hold in store for his own life. What’s important about what Jesus says, though, is it gives us an idea of just how universal that end will be—he says it will affect everyone, believer and non-believer alike. Of course, this naturally led to questions about when this might happen. People were just as curious then as we are now. They wanted to know when, who, and what they had to do to be saved. Interestingly, and I think most significantly, Jesus doesn’t answer these questions directly. What he says instead is that he wants people to live a different way. To not be afraid of living altogether.

Then finally we come to the latest passage written—the one that was today's second reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. In this passage from that letter, Paul, who also seemed to have a sense of the immediacy of Jesus' return, focuses not on when it will be or what it will be like, but rather how it is that we should live as expectant people. He tells us to be awake, lay aside works of darkness, put on the armor of light, and live honorably. Paul's not interested in doomsayers or seers predicting destruction. What Paul wants is what Jesus wanted—for people to behave like disciples. He wants us to live like followers of Jesus.

Being a disciple means living a life that is always full of tension. Paul says we are supposed to honor the civil authority but not be subject to it when it threatens our freedom. Earlier in Romans he taught that we are responsible for the new humanity, a new moral order. But it's not a morality of just being pure in our behavior. Instead, Paul calls us to live into a morality that stands against oppression, injustice, and anything the state does (including making war) because it suits the state. Treating others with respect and dignity is a part of it. Actively seeking peace and justice and refusing to participate in actions that lead to violence are the rest.

So, where does this leave us? Well, I think it begs the question . . . can we, as responsible disciples, really help to bring in the Kingdom? Can we make the vision of Isaiah come true? Certainly not if we think we are the only people who can. That, I believe, is the fatal flaw of most extremist religions. They completely discount the work of God in other people.

But I believe we are called to something different. Our job this Advent season is to break down barriers that separate us from others, to find in others, including those not of our faith, the potential for a new humanity. Some people think Advent should be a time of quiet waiting. I believe it should be a time of active searching! Searching for the spark of Jesus in others, repairing and polishing our own armor of light, and looking for hope when people say there isn't any.

Advent is not really about getting ready for Christmas, either. It is a separate, intense season of looking for, and listening for, the hope planted by God within each of us. It is a time of shutting out darkness, refusing to accept it as part of life. Even though it is the darkest part of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, Advent is a time to light the lamps and scatter the darkness, not brood over it.

There are many references in the Scriptures today to "the day." But rather than they day of judgment that the members of Carlton Pearson's former denomination speak of, I think that "day" should be thought of as floods of light banishing the lies we tell ourselves that keep us from the truth. It should be thought of as light scattering the darkness from before us. It should be thought of as energy, morality, and joy. That "Day" should be lived as new behavior, casting away the works of darkness and finding wonderful things that disciples have always known were there. It should mean letting the light shine into our souls and revealing the things we've been hiding there, the things we know displease God and keep us from living as people of the light.

The thought of that "day" of Christ's second coming can be cleansing as well revealing. Because the light from Christ's birth, death and resurrection surrounds us all. This Advent let us walk in it, live with it and behave in response to it. May your Advent be a season to remember because of it.

Amen.