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“The World Is About to Turn”

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

On Monday, we held a beautiful funeral for Sally Benedict. While the joyful fellowship continued over lunch downstairs, I ducked out to the study to start working on today's worship service. I was having a lovely time, thinking through the images of Advent, Isaiah's kingdom of peace, and God's light coming into this world. The hours passed, and the building emptied out, and I began to flip through the Advent hymns in the brand new hymnal (published just a few months ago), singing some of them aloud to myself. I was especially caught by one known as the “Canticle of the Turning,” which is a modern paraphrase of Mary's Magnificat, set to an old Irish ballad tune.

“My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near
and the world is about to turn.”

By the time I left the building, everyone else had gone, including the Presbytery folks who were busily getting ready for our meeting in Maryland on Tuesday. I walked outside, the lines of these hymns and the fiery words of John the Baptist still in my ears, and I was so caught by the uniform gray-white of the sky, and the slight chill in the air that seemed to cast a blanket of quiet and still over the whole scene.

I walked up to the cemetery, and looked out over these beautiful old gravestones and monuments; everything was shades of gray, the grass faded and dull, the trees bare, and the gray cat who I sometimes see wandering around the church looked at me curiously. The temperature was pretty mild, and yet it felt like so perfectly December. Everything was still, and beginning to hibernate - to rest in suspension, getting ready to wait quietly for the springtime.

That's part of what Advent is about, I think. We are given a whole season for nothing but waiting. Which is sort of odd, in the midst of this culture that zips directly from one holiday to another, one set of brightly colored decorations and cheerful embroidered hand towels to the next. But Advent is a season simply to pause. We are not in the habit of this kind of waiting; we bustle quickly indoors against the cold, and dress up the white and gray with evergreen branches and glittery red bows.

And yet while we are challenged by this strange stillness and restfulness, there is something humming just under the surface. Something new is coming.

In the midst of that quiet waiting, a passive kind of hope for future life and color and joy, there also come prophets, like Isaiah and like John the Baptist; like Mary in her own way. Appearing in those wilderness places, John calls out to a slumbering world – Repent! The kingdom of heaven has come near! The day we have been waiting for is coming!

And in our day, we've become numb to those voices, on street corners and elsewhere, calling for repentance – they are as abundant in our city centers as there were aspiring messiahs in Jesus' day! The word "repent" has almost come to signify "Stop listening – I'm probably crazy."

But the root of the word repentance is really about *turning*; about returning to the paths of rightness that we stray from so easily. It's a course correction: slight at first, but if we continue too long in that fraction of a degree off-course, we become further and further from the path. And perhaps, insofar as the ones we mark as crazy are those people who aren't following the same path everyone else is, there's some truth to that charge as well. Usually the prophets who point out where we have strayed from our courses are those who stand outside them enough that we do mark them as crazy, as outsiders, as nuts not worth listening to. It is certainly easier to ignore them than to re-examine the things we've become accustomed to.

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As our world mourns the passing this week of former South African president and anti-apartheid leader Madiba Nelson Mandela, our temptation is both to glorify his memory and to erase the controversy surrounding his work. As we have done with other great freedom fighters like Martin Luther King, Jr., we have chosen to forget that, far from quoted as inspirational truths as they are today, until recently his words were usually condemned by our leaders and so by mainstream America.

In the 80s, President Reagan added Mandela and his African National Congress to the official US list of terrorist groups because of the support they received from the Soviet Union. Even after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, our government still considered him a communist and terrorist until 2008. Even this week, when Texas Senator Ted Cruz posted a memorial to Mandela's life and work on his Facebook page, scores of commenters blasted Cruz for paying tribute to a "terrorist commie murderer."

Which is understandable, in a way, because throughout his life Mandela was a vocal critic of American military actions in Iraq and throughout the world, as well as the continued racial and economic inequalities in this country.

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As I stood this week looking out at the graveyard and the peaceful quiet of ancestors at rest, I was reminded, oddly, of a scene from the movie *Hunger Games: Catching Fire*. This is the middle chapter of a trilogy set in a dystopian future America; most of the country is divided into twelve districts, which work for poverty wages to produce goods for the Capitol, and every year two children from each district are forced to fight one another to the death (the Hunger Games) as their every move is recorded and televised, slickly edited and narrated by a perfectly-coiffed talk show host, for the entertainment of the people in the Capitol. The last child to survive is crowned the Victor, and allowed to live a life of relative luxury, as an example to the districts of what is possible if you "work hard," or just kill enough people.

It is not the most original storyline – plenty of comparisons have been made to *The Lottery*, to *Battle Royale*, and others – but then, the parallels to our own world are so striking that originality is perhaps not the point.

Near the beginning of this second film, it is the dead of winter somewhere in the future Appalachia of District 12, the poorest of the poor, and the Victor's Village is a long-empty row of beautiful stone houses, surrounded by snow and bare trees and a blanket of desolation – because no one ever wins from District 12. And in flutters Capitol-dweller Effie Trinket and her friends, covered in plumage and baubles, looking as out of place as they possibly could be. They've come for Katniss Everdeen, the coal-miner's daughter who managed to make it out of the arena alive, breaking the rules of the game in the process and unintentionally setting off a spark of defiance that is rippling throughout the districts.

The cold, white, stately stillness of that scene is peaceful and quiet, waiting, and just under the surface there is a revolution brewing. The people have had enough of hunger and violence and inequality, and that quiet waiting time is tinged with planning and expectation. Their world is about to be turned upside-down, as the spark catches fire and the working people catch a glimpse of what is possible. By the end of this second film, their country is at war and that dormant street scene is burned to the ground with the rest of their homes.

And that is Advent too. Something is coming. And while the remembered coming of a baby in a manger is mostly these days an occasion for sparkles and parties, the future coming will set the world on fire in a way we can't possibly expect. The injustice and suffering of the world we know will be wiped out, somehow, by the God of justice and the Christ of healing and wholeness.

“From the halls of power to the fortress tower, not a stone will be left on stone.
Let the king beware, for your justice tears every tyrant from his throne.
The hungry poor shall weep no more for the bread they can never earn;
there are tables spread; every mouth be fed, for the world is about to turn.”

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But– the Kingdom of God is about peace, isn't it? We lit the Peace candle today! And Isaiah painted an idyllic picture for us – in my bible, it even has the heading “The Peaceful Kingdom.”

But Isaiah spoke these words to a people at war. Judah knew violence and captivity and persecution – they knew what it was to be lambs in the midst of wolves. They did not have time for idyllic visions. But Isaiah speaks of leopards and wolves, lions and bears and asps and adders, and his people *did* know predators like these. His images of calves and lions together might have sounded to their ears as absurd and unlikely as Nazis lying down with Jews, Israelis with Palestinians; a white Wall Street executive having a friendly lunch with a black ex-convict, the Bank of America CEO buying coffee for a single mother on welfare.

It is absurd, it is almost unthinkable, and yet it is the kingdom of God. It is a peace that will not come easily. But it is coming.

Just as Isaiah speaks of a shoot coming up from a dead stump, these shoots of new green hope are coming up through the dry, dead-looking old growth that we'd given up even watering, because why bother. New growth is coming up, dreamed up and nurtured by our prophets until it bursts through the dry ground and can't be stopped.

This week, the New Castle Presbytery (of which we're a part) had a meeting down in Snow Hill, MD, at the Makemie Memorial Church, one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in this country. And in that grand old space, we voted to charter one of the newest churches in our denomination. Over the last year or two, a group of Ghanaian immigrants with Presbyterian roots began gathering together for worship, as they realized that despite being deeply Presbyterian, they did not feel at home in any of the existing churches in their area.

Their numbers grew, and they were recognized as a worshiping community in New Castle Presbytery, and one of their leaders, Mawuna Gardesey, was trained and commissioned as a lay pastor to serve them. This week, the Ghanaian fellowship was recognized as a full member church of the PC(USA) and rechristened the Olivet Presbyterian Church – in their new home in the building of the Pencader Presbyterian Church, another church with deep historic roots like our own, which was forced to close its doors last spring.

Where we thought there was only death, life is springing up. And it may not be the life we expect, or even the kind of life that some folks might have wanted. But new life – *God's* life, and *God's* light – is coming into our world with a force and a brilliance that can't be matched and can't be contained by our precedents and our expectations.

We shy away from fiery prophets and radical preachers, because they shake us from the hopeless normalcy of routine and the injustices we've come to accept. But sometimes we allow ourselves to be drawn in. Sometimes we can catch their vision – the picture these prophets can paint for us of a world transformed by the love of God, where all that is wrong with our world can be made right. A vision where all these interconnected obstacles and frustrations that get in our way when we try to do good; all of these oppressions are cast aside by God's glorious advent bursting into our world.

We don't know when this kingdom will come. But we look around us and we can see new growth springing up sometimes, sparks of the justice and true peace that is to come, a revolution brewing in the cold and forgotten places. And so, in a few short weeks, we will celebrate God's coming to earth, with glitter and frills and sparkles in the midst of the gray, because we know, we trust, that Jesus *has* come, and the revolution of God is already at hand.

“This saving word that our forebears heard
is the promise which holds us bound,
til the spear and rod can be crushed by God,
who is turning the world around.”