

The Advent Apocalypse

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

Luke 21:25–36

When I was in my twenties, I read *Moby-Dick* over and over again. It's an American classic, it's a work of genius, it's about high adventure on the high seas—what's not to love? And I really identified with the narrator, Ishmael—a Biblical name, one that suggests exile and conflict. As the book opens Ishmael says, "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can."

That's what I felt like, I guess—like some of the shine had come off my life, like some of the optimism and big dreams of my college days had rubbed off. And along with it—and this is harder to detect

sometimes—but my curiosity about the world, my sense of wonder and awe and adventure in everyday experiences was missing, my sense of connection to myself—my deepest self: my meaning, my calling, my purpose—had faded. Have you ever felt like that? Like Ishmael? Like me? I think most of have experienced, or will, what St. John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul.”

So, here we are, on the first day of Advent. And, in fact, the days *are* getting shorter, and it *is* a damp, drizzly November. And maybe you feel that. Maybe you feel nature being reflected within you, trying to set the mood for you to be called to begin a journey of your own. But in the world around us, in the secular world—the world of cultural and market forces which do not want you to slow down, do not want you to take account of your life or re-evaluate what truly fulfills you—in that world, no journey is necessary, don’t put yourself out, it’s already Christmas. The decorations are up, the carols are on the radio, the lights are out, the ads are playing, the gifts are in transit. Holly Jolly! The secular world is willing to give you Christmas without any effort, any discomfort, any journey of any kind.

But for us, in church, it’s not Christmas yet. Advent is the journey to Christmas. It’s meant to be a transformative journey. And so there’s this noticeable juxtaposition of tone in the world outside the church walls and the service within the church walls: We’re always a little shocked on the first Sunday of Advent, when the Gospel reading doesn’t sound the least bit Christmasy—it sounds like an apocalypse.

You heard it: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” And don’t forget to add (like Ishmael) that we’ll be grim about the mouth, depressed, loafing around funeral parlors, and brawling in the streets.

The Christian notion of the Second Coming is two-fold: It will be both cosmic in scale and personal in scale. It will happen both at the end of time and anytime you “stand and raise up your head” looking for something greater than yourself to save you from yourself. We take Jesus’ words seriously when he said that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” Because he was right. It was true for Jesus’ generation. And it’s true for every generation. That day “will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.” None of us escape the dark night of the soul. And none of us can escape the absolute necessity of wrestling with it and responding to it.

That’s why the first twenty or so chapters of *Moby-Dick* are really an Advent story. We begin in the damp, drizzly November of Ishmael’s soul and conclude with him sailing out of Nantucket on Christmas Day. But there’s also a warning built into *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael joins a ship with a maniacal, one-legged captain, Ahab, who’s only purpose and meaning in life are focused on killing the whale who ate his missing leg. And he’ll sacrifice anything and anyone for his revenge. Uh-oh! Wrong boat!

That's why this apocalyptic language is so appropriate to the Advent season. It's the same kind of warning: When you begin an Advent journey, you need to pick your target carefully. Be on your guard! Be alert at all times! Or will you just drift and allow the currents of the world or the currents of your own petty desires to carry you where they will? This is what Ishmael was referring to as "the strong moral principle" that keeps him from assaulting his neighbors in the street. Before you pick up your AR-15 and head out onto the streets to "protect your community," before you pick up that brick and throw it through the window of that business, ask yourself: Am I doing this to choose life? Am I doing this to choose life? You better be sure you know what you're truly choosing, you better be sure to know who's captaining the ship. The worst thing we can do is to just not think about the choice. Because when we don't intentionally choose life, death may make our decisions for us. When we don't choose de-escalation, the one-legged maniac may make take over our boat. Because when we do not actively choose life, our connection to our world, to other lives, and to our own life fades. It's no mistake that in Advent we are headed for the birth of a baby—the birth of a new life, the birth of a bodily healer and a soul Savior. Advent wants you to choose life!

But life isn't always easy, is it? I've met a lot of parents who have confessed to me that all the busyness and traditions of the holidays—the tree, the decorations, the lights, the presents, and (of course) Santa Claus—they're only doing it for their kids. If it wasn't for their kids, they'd drop the whole charade. I think it's wonderful to do things especially for the kids around the holidays. I have wonderful childhood memories of Christmastime and I want my kids to have the same experience. But, beloved, "the most wonderful time of the year" (despite all the toys, and the Santa, and Christmas cartoon specials, and all of that) is not a children's holiday, right? It's meant for all of us. We're meant to choose it, to choose the best of it, for ourselves.

Children are closer to Christmas than we grownups are because children are closer to wonder than we are. It's the same reason that Jesus says that children are closer to the Kingdom of God than grownups are and that if we want to enter the Kingdom, we have to enter it like a little child. Instead, we spend most of our time trying to get our kids to act more grown-up and, come the holidays, we burn ourselves out trying to give them an experience of wonder and joy they could mostly manage on their own without our intervention. Maybe, we're the ones who need a little of their intervention.

A similar kind of thing happens when young parents are looking for a church. The most common answer I hear from parents of young children about why they're looking for a church or what they're looking for in a church (and it's obvious, right?) it's that they want their kids to have an experience of growing up in a church: a foundation in strong moral principles, a religious education, church friends and events. And the question I always try to get to eventually, at some point, is, "Mom, Dad, beloved child of God, what about you?" Don't you deserve some consideration? What about your spiritual life? What about your relationship to God? What about your church friends? Church is a cradle-to-grave operation. It's not one we're meant to grow out of, it's meant for all of us, at every stage of life, if only we can choose it for ourselves.

Apocalypse is this big scary word, but all that it literally means in the Greek is “an uncovering.” In every life, and in many lives maybe more often than not, the covers are pulled up over our heads. Something is blocking the view, the magic, the engagement. And wouldn’t it be nice if there were a time—a sacred season—for getting up, for raising our heads, and for making a choice; a time to reveal what is hidden below and let it run wild in the beautiful world again?

Well, beloved, that is why the very first season of every year in the Christian life brings us the Advent apocalypse. It ain’t Christmas yet! This is the time to choose the Christmas you will celebrate. Where will your ship be headed when it leaves port on Christmas day? What will your heart be filled with? What will you have uncovered? What will you have chosen for yourself?

This Advent, Beloved, is our opportunity, our choice to journey toward the manger. To put some of the shine back on our lives. To step back out the door and (safely, responsibly—choosing life!) reconnect with our community in person. It’s a season to leave the house and to come back home—home to God, home to yourself, home to the manger and the new life that is waiting there for you.