



The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Rector
Advent 1
November 29, 2020

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9
Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18
Gospel: Mark 13: 24-37

Jesus said, *"In those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
the moon will not give its light,
the stars will be falling from heaven,
And the powers in the heavens will be shaken."*

Should we wonder why James Baldwin's 1963 set of essays *The Fire Next Time* have been selected as an Advent study for our diocesan community, led by Bishop Perry and Sister Veronica Mary, we need look no further than the first few pages, which comprised a letter that Baldwin writes to his nephew (also named James) on occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation, which Baldwin rightly notes, is celebrated one hundred years too soon. Baldwin underscores throughout the letter that we have no other hope than to love one another toward justice.

Speaking as a black man to a younger black man in America, Baldwin describes his white brothers and sisters as being *"still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."*

"They have had to believe for many years," he continues, "and for innumerable reasons that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger."

In this case," he continues, "the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity."

"Try to imagine," he explains, "how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in nature is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality."

"Well," he continues, "the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar; and, as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."

And Jesus said, *"In those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
the moon will not give its light,
the stars will fall from heaven,*

And heaven and earth will be shaken to their foundations.”

“What matters,” Baldwin concludes in the letter “is that we, with love...force our brothers [and, I would add, our sisters] to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.”

“It will be hard,” he says to his nephew, “but you come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. And one of them said, ‘The very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off.’”

Advent. Advent is when we wait — expectantly — for the dungeon and for heaven and for earth to shake and for freedom and justice to dawn and prevail at last. This waiting, with the visceral expectation that we will actually see it, is Advent hope.

It is not a *“submissive, bland hope,”* as one of my favorite theologians Sam Wells describes. It is not a passive hope. He gives the example of a dishwasher. When our dishwasher breaks and we don’t know how to fix it, we might say to someone within earshot, *“Can someone please fix this? I have no idea what to do with this broken dishwasher.”* -- passing the work off to someone else in vague existence.

Or we might add another example of one who might say, *“I don’t know how to fix racism. Could someone please fix it? Perhaps someone else will figure out how to fix it, and I won’t need to do anything.”*

In Isaiah we hear a searing, nearly scolding, angst or...is it a passive vague plea? In the passage that Kate read so beautifully, *“Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down! Oh that **you** would tear open the heavens and come down! Oh that **you** would come down and fix this. How bad does it have to get?”* we might hear ourselves think.

And yet, when God did come down from heaven, we do not know that heaven and earth quaked... they may have...the angels erupted in song and heaven and nature sang! Oh, how we want to sing...

But God did not come with a heavy hand to destroy within one definitive sweep all that was wrong with the world. That definitely did not happen. Defying any of our instinctual definitions of brute strength, God did not come as a bully to the bullies. God did not come to overcome evil with evil.

God came as a baby.

God came as a baby...unable to speak, much less to fight...unable to help us, except to disarm us, to magnify our capacity for love well beyond (as any parent can attest) our furthest imagination.

God came as a baby, entirely dependent on us to help...to tend, to care, to clothe and, in so doing, to transform us...to draw us and shock us out of our expectations of normality into something entirely new.

And so today, Beloved, we wait.

We wait with a visceral expectant hope, a hope that we *will* truly see God show up soon, in some way, in new ways, in small ways.

We wait with a hope that understands that it is we — not just some other people — but you and me...that we are a *big* part of the new things that God is doing.

An Advent hope, to work with Sam Well's idea a little bit further, is one that is schooled in how God *does* address things: which is usually, we observe, not by fixing...not by fixing...sometimes by sending us to fix, empowering us to fix, giving us the instincts to learn and to fix and to grow, to change and to be transformed.

This hope observes that God often (wow!) transcends our whole notion of what it would mean to fix...and instead births us into a new relationship, into a new way of being, into renewed minds and hearts. We are transformed by the renewal of our minds and our hearts.

This Advent, beginning now, may we prepare to be disarmed.

May we prepare and wait with expectant hope to be drawn out — yet again and again — of life as we have known it, toward again what it could be...what God dreams it could be...What it one day shall be. We know it!

May we prepare to be restless, to lose sleep over making things right for one another.

And may we...expect those dungeons to shake.