

December 3, 2017
First Sunday of Advent, Year B, RCL
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

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

Last year on December 31, many of us were quite relieved to put behind us the horrible year of 2016. Unfortunately, our worse fears about 2017 are becoming reality. Families are being destroyed by random and heartless immigration enforcement. National lands are being sold off to the highest bidder. Climate change is being denied even as parts of the nation get either scorched or drenched. Puerto Rico continues to suffer the indignity of not *really* being a part of the United States. Gun violence continues unabated. Racist rhetoric has emboldened white supremacists.

Into this cauldron dropped the disclosures about the pandemic harassment and abuse, *by men, of women*. Notice how carefully I said that: the pandemic abuse *by men of women*. We can no longer deny its pervasiveness or its cultural acceptability. My own life experiences made the disclosures unsurprising; nonetheless, they have been hugely disheartening. I expect that many of you feel the same.

Yesterday morning broke with the news that the Senate tax bill passed overnight. Unfortunately, it wasn't just a bad dream. The uphill gush of money from the poor to the rich is about to be accelerated by a tax pump more powerful than anything we had imagined. Justifying it requires an appalling level of prevarication and hypocrisy. For the lawmakers who identify as Christians, and that's most if not all of those who voted for the bill, it is a sinful sellout to the forces of Evil.

In times like this, we must remember that we, too, are vulnerable to those forces. Evil surrounds its would-be foes with darkness, through which it lures them on a descent to the shore of the River Styx. With the false inevitability of Hades visible just beyond, Evil tempts them into the *inertia* of *despair*. In the face of such temptation, we must remind one another of this: course-correcting resistance requires only a single *true* and *unfailing* glimmer of light.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. As the book *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church* describes it, Advent is "The first season of the church year, beginning with the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continuing through the day before Christmas. The name is derived from a Latin word for 'coming.' The season is a time of preparation and expectation for the coming celebration of our Lord's *nativity*, and for the *final* coming of Christ 'in power and glory.'"¹ With Jesus as the Light of the World, we commonly describe Advent metaphorically as the season of the coming of the light into the darkness.

Let's consider the idea that today is the first day of the new church year. One might suppose that the church year should start on Christmas, with the birth of Jesus. If the church year started on Christmas, we could skip the hard part and head right to the fun. But that's not what we do. Instead we begin at a point that is much more complex and nuanced. We start with a young woman, a teenager, who is eight months pregnant. She is a teenager, eight months pregnant, traveling the countryside on a donkey, accompanied by a man who has taken pity on her.

If we were living in first-century Palestine, there would be nothing unusual about that young woman's age, because it would be typical for a first pregnancy. With rudimentary health care, every pregnancy would be a life-threatening danger to the mother. One can imagine that, over the course of her pregnancy, any prospective mother's anticipatory joy would slowly yield to terrifying fear. A teen pregnancy, while common, would be extra risky. And this young woman is traveling.

If that young woman lived today, most people would judge her harshly and call her irresponsible. After all, she is way too young to be pregnant, she isn't married, she lacks the resources necessary to care for herself and her baby, and her boyfriend isn't even the baby's father. If she accesses free health care and other services, she hears complaints that taxpayers are footing the bill for her bad decisions, or that her boyfriend should get a better job, though no one can say where those jobs are.

Then or now, it doesn't matter that the young woman had found herself in an impossible situation; or that her body had long been the target of men who aspired to use it for their own gratification; or that those very men ridiculed and disparaged *her* for *their* urges, whether her response to them was *yes* or *no*.

To be fair, I should note that I'm conflating the Gospels to describe that young woman. The Gospel of Mark, which will be our primary Gospel source for the coming year, tells us nothing about the nativity of Jesus. Still, we can assume that Jesus' human life on Earth began inside his young human mother's belly. That's an important observation.

Back in the 1990s, feminist author and activist Gloria Steinem published an essay called, "What if Freud were Phyllis?"² In the essay, Steinem satirically flips the narrative on Sigmund Freud. She imagines how his work would have been different if he had been a woman. One example pertinent to this sermon: an imaginary phenomenon called "womb envy," by which a man's lack of a womb, and his resulting inability to give birth, give him an unconscious envy that drives him to compensatory behavior that is overly aggressive toward women. More than twenty years after Steinem wrote those words, we might wonder whether there really is something to them. Maybe "womb envy" can explain the behaviors exposed through the revelations of #MeToo.

Today's reading from Mark is part of Jesus' response to a disciple who comments on the magnificence of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus describes the Temple's destruction and his own return as the "*Son of Man*."

The reading from Mark is *apocalyptic* in nature. For Christians, *apocalyptic* is most associated with the Book of Revelation, but it shows up in bits and pieces elsewhere in the New Testament and in the Hebrew Scriptures. We tend to think of *apocalypse* as only a prediction of coming death and destruction. But it's much less and much more than that. The Greek word *apocalypse* actually means an *uncovering* or a *revealing*, generally of societal injustice.

Mark tells us to "keep awake." It's that sort of uncovering and revealing that we must keep awake to. For several recent Sundays, even though it wasn't even yet Advent, that's also been the message from Matthew. I guess we needed to hear it more than once. Be ready; do the right thing; keep awake.

This year, Advent seems especially well timed. The events of our day might lead one to suppose that an apocalypse is happening right now, and that we are living through the revelation of the hard truths that lie behind what previously had been impenetrable veneers. Deeply imbedded racism, misogyny, and more are being uncovered in all their malice.

As individuals of faith and as a community of faith, we have a role to play in these apocalyptic times. To paraphrase Paul in our reading from First Corinthians, "*we* are not lacking in any spiritual gift as *we* wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." We wait for Christ to reveal, and in the meantime Christ reveals the injustice in our world. In the face of Evil, we are witnesses to the truth. We are witnesses in the true sense, as those who both see and testify. When we face despair, we remember that the revelation of the truth is ultimately for the good; it is in fact a step of preparation for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus has yet to return as the "*Son of Man*," but he was already born of a woman. Yes, our savior was once nourished in the belly of a pregnant teenager, a young woman who was entrusted and empowered to carry the light in the darkness. How unlikely was that. This Advent, join me in accompanying that young woman during her ninth month of pregnancy. She is our reminder that revelation is a necessary step, and that *salvation* and *reconciliation* and *restoration* will continue to arrive in the most unlikely times and in the most unlikely locations. On this journey, let yourself know darkness through which she travels, even as you continue to follow the unfailing glimmer of light and truth that she carries. Through it all, keep awake, and keep proclaiming, through word and deed, the advent of *real* Gospel of peace, justice, and prosperity.

Notes

¹ From the Glossary of Terms on The Episcopal Church website, which says, "Glossary definitions provided courtesy of Church Publishing Incorporated, New York, NY, (All Rights reserved) from 'An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church, A User Friendly Reference for Episcopalians,' Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, editors" Available at http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/109399_13683_ENG_HTM.htm (accessed December 2, 2017).

² This essay is in Gloria Steinem, *Doing Sixty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).