

Happy New Year and welcome to advent. In the life of the church advent, which begins today, is thought to be the start of a new year. Once again we enter into a time of expectation, Jesus is born, the wise ones visit. From this beginning the liturgical year unfolds with an exploration of Jesus' life and teachings, Lent, Good Friday, Pentecost and so on. The cycle repeats itself year after year and, if you're a preacher, these advent Sundays always present an agonizing challenge. Don't get me wrong – it's not that I'm a Scrooge – its just that so many of the advent scripture readings take us to places of fanciful imagination or, worse, calamitous apocalypse. It seems fanciful enough to imagine that people will beat their swords into ploughs but the idea that there could be a day of judgment when you will be taken up to heaven while your spouse or your child or best friend is left behind to face the wrath, makes a preacher's task unenviable.

Knowing I was called to preach about a passage known in evangelical circles as 'the rapture', amidst the discerning and theologically progressive people of McClure Church, made me realize I needed help. And so, I tuned into a zoom educational event featuring a Biblical scholar from the Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg. The scholar began by asking us would-be preachers, "Do your people know their Bible?" The

answer may be obvious in Mennonite circles but it's a little more tenuous in United Church congregations. Our understanding of God and Jesus come from the Bible but few folks I know actually read their Bibles. Perhaps I wouldn't either if I didn't have to preach. The zoom professor explained that the only way to understand the strange scriptures of early Advent is to understand the Bible. 'Teach your people the Bible,' he advocated and then he us offered a simple formula: "Explain the Bible according to its six themes and then the stranger passages (such as we have this morning) will make sense.

So, take out your pens and papers and let's spend a few minutes in Bible 101. Theme #1 God creates. In the mythical stories of Genesis we learn that God created everything that exists and, as the refrain from chapter one tells us – God concludes that creation is good. Land and sea, plant and animal, the human creature, all is good and all are intended to live in paradise (cf the Garden of Eden) for ever. Throughout the Bible, God continues to be described as the Creator of a creation that is good. This in this creation is intended to be just, peaceful and harmonious.

Theme #2 ushers us into the shadow side of the creation, particularly the human creature, in whom harmony just can't be sustained. This sobering reality is brought to the forefront among the children of Adam and

Eve when Cain kills his brother Abel. Greed, envy, power-seeking, jealousy and death are introduced into paradise and this inability to live with harmony, peace and justice persists throughout the stories of the Bible.

Last weekend Victoria and I read the news together: Arson had struck the home of a former Christian school student; a shooting had occurred in a Colorado dance club; and the Russians were planning for Ukrainians to freeze in the dark. Victoria looked at me despondent and wondered aloud: “What is wrong with us humans?” The Bible names this ‘The Fall.’

In response to the fall of humanity God chooses to form a people who were to become an example of peace, harmony and justice. This is theme #3. God chooses the people whom we’ve come to know as the Israelites. They are not chosen for their own benefit but rather to be an example to everyone else (cf. ‘a light to the nations’) for it is God’s intention that all of the cosmos be returned to its original goodness. This project is not a straight path, and the Israelite people live in harmony and fall out of harmony; they care for one another and reject one another. The prophets are the truth-tellers of ancient Israel in that they call out the people when they fail; but, they also promise that God will make them a new creation. Despite the many failures the prophets hold on to this vision of peace, harmony and justice, a vision which is expressed in this morning’s Hebrew

Bible lesson where Isaiah predicts that one day people will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. There will come a time when people will study war no more.

Alas, this didn't work out as God had planned. Israel's ability to be a 'light to the nations' grows dim. God concludes that the only option is to enter creation and does so in the person of Jesus. This is Theme #4. Jesus initiated the kind of world that God intended – the sick are made well, the outcasts are welcomed, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the pursuit of power and wealth is turned upside down and love is the watchword. We may recall that after Cain slays his brother, he sarcastically asks, "Am I to be my brother's keeper?" At long last Jesus answers this question with a resounding 'Yes!' We are responsible for one another – the greatest commandment is that we "love one another as we love ourselves." For a few brief years in this isolated community surrounding Jesus, God's kin-dom is established - it is the new creation, it is a microcosm of the world that God intended, it is a foretaste of the cosmos being set right again. In the closing stories of the gospels the writers declare that despite the crucifixion, the new creation can't be pushed underground again. On that first Easter Sunday we learn that the

vision of a new world could not be suppressed as the kin-dom is resurrected in the lives of Jesus' friends.

Eventually Jesus' friends become known as church, and this is Theme #5. The church becomes the new Jerusalem, the place where paradise is once again realized in common meals, shared property, community abundance and the kind of relationships that cause bystanders to declare, "look how they love one another." The church was to take Israel's place as a 'light to the nations.' The church was to initiate and point to a time when the entire cosmos would return to its original state of peace, harmony and love.

This was a noble mission but perhaps even those in the earliest church knew this would not be an easy or immediate reality which brings us to the final Theme #6. The realization of this new creation is 'already' for those who had been in the company of Jesus, but 'not yet' for the rest of us. And so there grows up in the literature of the Bible a strand of testimony that imagines the day when the Way of Jesus will become the way of the world, the way of the Cosmos. It will be a day when the words of Jesus' prayer are to be realized, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It is this belief that produces some of the stranger passages of the New Testament. In this morning's reading a time of radical change is

imagined where some are 'taken up' into the way of Jesus; and some choose to remain in the old way of life. It is a time, according to the Book of Revelation (the last and strangest book of the Bible) when all things will be made known; in such a peaceful and harmonious time the lion and the lamb will lay down together. Hence, the Bible doesn't really have a conclusion. The time of peace, justice and harmony is predicted, is imagined, is awaited. Advent is a reminder of this waiting with hope. In advent, we remember God's birth in a manger, AND we still wait for the God-power to revolutionize how we live with one another.

And that is where the Mennonite professor concluded his lecture, sending us into small 'zoom groups' to discuss what we heard. I was in a group of four, the other participants seemingly older than myself. Perhaps I was feeling Scrooge-like that day because I found myself saying, "Nice story, so what!" I also found myself thinking, "This book is two thousand years old, and the news reports from last week suggest little has changed." Into that dour mood spoke a woman with pure white hair. "Last weekend," she said, "I stood in front of the Winnipeg legislature lobbying for action on climate change. There was a handful of us 'raging granny types' but the crowd was mostly comprised of bright, committed, vocal, young people who

could see a new future. They embodied a God-like-vision of a new creation.”

I was embarrassed by my cynicism. Another man, with a cane sitting beside his chair picked up the theme. “I’ve been so inspired,” he said, “by those brave Iranians who are standing up for freedom. Can you imagine that young woman, Masha Amini, so proud of her own body, so committed to self-expression, that she dared take off her hijab in spite of the morality police. This is a sign of a new creation – just look at all those people standing up for her now, despite the threats of arrest and torture. They see a new heaven and a new earth.

I shook my head. How could I have lived and loved this story for my whole life and missed Theme #6 – already, but not yet? The God-power is still at work in the cosmos using the same power we saw in Jesus – the power of radical love – to move the cosmos toward hoped for peace and harmony. The relentless news cycle can lead us to the myopic conclusion that ‘crucifixion’ is the final word. But we are Christians after all, we are destined to be resurrection people not just in a two thousand year-old story but today, in Advent - we are called to live with expectation. Perhaps God is still ‘coming again’ even in this advent season, not in the stories of

ancient Israel or in the machinations of a tired church but within the cosmos, still pushing us toward paradise.

Christmas is coming, a time when we Christians declare that God was born in human form. Maybe it's still happening. Maybe God looks like Greta Thunberg. Maybe God looks like Masha Amini. Maybe God looks like you knitting mitts for the homeless, redistributing your 'Moe bucks' to charity, sending a note of support to Caitlin Erikson after her home was torched. Maybe a new creation is on the horizon. Maybe we are right in the midst of it. Happy New Year, and may this Advent season be filled with visions of a new earth. Amen.