



Jesus *Crisis*

2021 Advent-Epiphany Devotional

Jesus Crisis

Phiwa Langeni

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. - Matthew 10:34 (NRSV)

Many a cartoon character has swung a sword haphazardly, their (un)intended targets escaping the consequences that would've befallen them had they encountered a real sword. Sword enthusiasts undoubtedly cringe to see these misrepresentations.

Likewise, Jesus enthusiasts—back then and now—likely cringe at his sharp words. We often imagine a child-inviting, good-news-bringing, body-and-spirit-healing Jesus. Alas, this double-sided Jesus is difficult to witness.

Of all the things he could've brought instead of peace, why bring a sword? My guess? Precision. From the metals utilized to the length, weight, and style, real-life swords are deliberately designed for their specific uses, making cartoon-like gestures nearly impossible without injuring oneself; that is, before the blade does. When used correctly, their slashes are nearly surgical.

With a meticulous commitment to justice, Jesus cuts into our world with a tool of destruction. Unlike typical sword wielders, though, he severs the systems that oppress those most in need. He dissects the divisions that perpetuate violence. He hacks the hate that poisons our shared divinity.

We've become so familiar with our communal sinfulness and individual unwellness that healing feels like a threat. That makes Jesus' unexpected tool choice even more essential because purposeful incisions do less damage than the jagged tears from prolonged stressors.

After a year of one crisis after another, clinging to what we've known is a natural choice. However, in this time of anticipation, might we embrace this new Crisis who arrives in the form of a tiny little baby?

PRAYER

Come, O Long-Awaited Crisis! Be near us, we pray, as we prepare for your arrival with purpose and precision.

A Righteous Branch

V i n c e A m l i n

"The days are surely coming, says God, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

- Jeremiah 33:14-15 (NRSV)

Every week in staff meeting, our sexton updates us on the replacement tree the city has promised us for the easement in front of the church. A storm blew through last summer and cracked the old oak in two. A couple weeks later, the Bureau of Forestry finished the job.

The stump showed well over a hundred rings. Then they ground that down too. No hope of a shoot springing up spontaneously.

So our sexton keeps us updated. Every week. And every week the update is: still waiting.

It doesn't matter that it's been over a year with no change. It doesn't matter when I say, "We've got a lot to cover today." It doesn't matter when I get snippy and insist, "I think everyone is aware of the situation!"

He keeps it on the agenda.

Like those who persist in the cause of righteousness and justice. The ones who sound the alarm. The ones who point to what is missing, what has been destroyed.

The ones who won't let it drop. Even though it makes things awkward. Even though people get snippy. Even though there has been no change and everyone is aware of the situation.

Because everyone is aware of the situation and there has been no change.

They keep it on the agenda. Every week. Every day. They hold to the promises that have been made.

P R A Y E R

Righteous one, keep your promises.

November 29, 2021

Someone Else's Time

Liz Miller

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. - 2 Peter 3:8 (NRSV)

When the work ahead is daunting—whether it is dismantling white supremacy, reversing climate change, or ridding the world of its many phobias—it soothes us to say, “This is the work of the next generation.” We will do what we can, of course, but we don’t really expect change until someone else is in a position of power or has better ideas than we have.

We solidify this division of labor with our definition of generations, measuring only in 20- to 30-year increments, doling out responsibilities and assignments accordingly. This generation caused the financial crisis; the next is called to solve it. This generation enacted civil rights; the next moves us past tolerance. No matter the issue at hand, the underlying message is the same: it is someone else’s job to fix this mess.

But through God’s eyes, where decades pass like seconds and centuries are the same length as sitcoms, the divisions are meaningless. Pointing the finger of blame or kicking the can of justice down the road might make us feel better in the moment, but all God sees is a thousand years of people harming each other. Hasn’t God waited long enough? May we not let one more day pass before uniting in our efforts to move from hurt to healing.

PRAYER

Dear God, we promise to work together to clean up this mess, even if it takes a thousand years. Amen.

November 30, 2021

Lift Your Heads, Again

M a r y L u t i

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” - Luke 21:28 (NRSV)

A friend told me she finds Advent frustrating. Every year we lift our heads, stand on tiptoe, watch for Christ to bring in the new age, and nothing happens. After 2,000 years, her toes are starting to go numb, her enthusiasm's waning. Advent feels sort of routine.

Scripture says that for God, a thousand years are like a day. By divine standards, we have short attention spans. If Advent feels routine, maybe we have a skewed sense of time. But it could also be that we're harboring the illusion that we're OK. Even amid pandemics and wars and political upheaval, we persist in that delusion. Maybe we get tired of waiting because we don't really need what we're waiting for.

I go through my days with my Visa in one hand and the Golden Rule in the other, and with them I

shape a mostly adequate life. And as long as it's not disrupted in some truly disastrous way, I don't feel a crying need to be redeemed. I pray with the church, "Come, Lord Jesus!" But under my breath I'm begging, "Just not right now." As someone once quipped, if you're having a decent year in your own kingdom, it's hard to long sincerely for the coming of God's.

If Advent feels frustrating, or boring, or beside the point, maybe it's because we haven't gotten real enough yet to need what it promises. Or to perceive and care about how much others need it.

One more time, then. Let's prop up our heads and keep them lifted again, this year and year after year. Pray again for Christ to come. But even more, hope to be struck to the core by just how much we need him to.

P R A Y E R

Make me feel my need for you, O Christ. Help me say, "Come!" And mean it.

December 1, 2021

When the Bad News is the Good News

Matt Laney

The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. - 2 Peter 3:10 (NRSV)

Lewis and Clark were on an expedition.

At one point, Lewis said to his team, "Guys, I have good news and bad news. First, the good news: We covered 50 miles today, more than any other day on our entire trip! Now the bad news: We're lost."

There are many such "good news/bad news" jokes with a variety of scenarios. I'd like to add one more based on the text from 2 Peter.

Peter: "Church, I've got good news and more good news: The Day of the Lord is coming!"

Church: "Yay! And there's even more good news?"

Peter: "Yes! When the Lord returns, the heavens will vanish, everything on earth will be dissolved with

fire and all of humanity's shameful deeds will be displayed on God's jumbotron! Can I get an amen?!"

Church: (crickets)

I don't associate the coming of Christ with seemingly bad news, definitely not in this season of good cheer. Yet, for the writer of 2 Peter, the bad news is the good news. Why? Because their church faced regular persecution and hardship. Word that Christ was coming to reveal and destroy the evils they deplored could not have been more welcome.

We are no different. When the daily news is bad, really bad, we quickly pray for its undoing, such as...

P R A Y E R

God, we feel lost among so much bad news: white supremacy, nationalism, authoritarianism, greed, falsehoods, pollution, pestilence, disease, hunger, addiction, violence, temperatures, wildfires, storms. May they all be destroyed when you appear. Soon please.

December 2, 2021

Hood and Holy

Naomi Washington - Leapheart

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish. - John 1:14 (The Message)

To me, the pandemic has felt like a cruel game of hide-and-seek with God. I didn't know I was "it," but since March 2020, I've found myself covering my eyes and counting cases, deaths, tears, and fears. When I get tired of counting and begin to search for God in all of it, I panic. I've looked under every rock and around every corner. Sometimes I find the residue of God's presence, but other times I find only chaos. Where is God?

So many of us have lamented the disruption that Covid-19 has been to our worship. Sure, God is everywhere, but God's home base is the sanctuary, right?

But as Shug Avery says to Celie in Alice Walker's epic novel, *The Color Purple*: "...have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a

bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God."

God's home base is the neighborhood and God is the preeminent good neighbor. Picture it: God is on the front stoop, watching the kids jump double-dutch, waving at the mail carrier, listening to Frankie Beverly and Maze on repeat. God wants to be in the messiness of life with us, sighing with us as we sit in the idling car in the driveway after a long day of work, pacing the floor with us when we can't fall asleep, dancing with us as we fold laundry to our favorite tunes. Have you seen God in the neighborhood lately?

PRAYER

God, you know where we live! Thank you for moving in, not to displace or shame, but to share light and love and life. May our search for you always lead us home.

December 3, 2021

Candles in the Night

Talitha Arnold

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." - Luke 1:78-79 (NRSV)

"I will light Candles this Christmas," wrote theologian Howard Thurman in a poem published after his death in 1981. "Candles of joy despite all sadness, candles of hope where despair keeps watch, candles of courage for fears ever present."

Like old Zechariah living under Roman oppression, Thurman knew only too well the shadows of his time. As an African-American boy growing up in Florida, he'd experienced first-hand the long night of segregation and the ever-present fear of racial violence. As an adult, he learned that racism and hatred weren't confined to one state or region. Thurman came of age during World War I when African Americans fought and died for their country, but then came home to a nation that still denied their full humanity. He was 19 when the flu

pandemic broke out, exposing the country's chasms between class and race.

Yet also like Zechariah, Thurman knew the power of light to dispel the shadows of fear and despair. Connecting prayer and faith with resistance and social justice, he called Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, John Lewis, and others in the Civil Rights movement to light their candles of courage and hope.

Thurman's poem continues to call us. May we light our Advent Candles to be, in his words, candles of "peace for tempest-tossed days, candles of grace to ease heavy burdens, candles of love to inspire all [our] living."

P R A Y E R

Thank you, God, for the witness of Howard Thurman. Help us this Advent to light your candles to "burn all the year long." Amen.

December 4, 2021

Hornblower

Quinn G. Caldwell

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for she has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David."

- Luke 1:68-69 (NRSV)

Raising up a "mighty savior" would be a good reason to bless the Lord God of Israel, but actually, that's not what Zechariah says has happened. Translation issues; you know how it is. What he actually says is that God has raised up a "horn of salvation." Much more evocative. "Savior" slips right through our heads as if we know what it means (though we don't). But a horn of salvation? Like, what could that even be?

If you assume it refers to Jesus, as many do (see "mighty savior"), then it's pretty confusing. Is it, like, a horn on a goat's head? Is Jesus going to butt his way through the world? Possible; Jesus wasn't as gentle as some of us want to believe. But Jesus hasn't been born yet, and Zechariah is talking about this horn of salvation like it's already here.

On the other hand, Zechariah is currently holding his own son. The one who would grow up to become John the Baptist, the one who would point and announce and say, "Prepare ye the way." Like a herald, like a trumpeter. Like the shofar that echoed out of the cloud on Mt. Sinai, that brings walls crumbling to the ground, that can be heard echoing across the hills to marshal the people, that calls them to worship and repentance.

Not the savior, but the one who gets people to pay attention long enough to notice that the savior is here.

PRAYER

You and I know I can't save the world. But the horn of salvation is an instrument I'm willing to learn. Amen.

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