

Title: Envisioning “Next”
Date: 12/11/2022 (Advent 3, Year A)
Location: St. Alban’s Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Isaiah 35:1-10](#); [James 5:7-10](#); [Matthew 11:2-11](#); [Canticle 15](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/eG21gCVQo8o?t=1282>

O God, grant us the endurance to follow you
along the Holy Way,
and may we remember always
that thanks to your grace,
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
Amen.

Throughout these Sundays of Advent, I’ve been preaching my first sermon series. Advent is a season of preparation, and not only are we preparing for Christmas, we are preparing for the days that come **after** Christmas. So, the theme I gravitated toward was developing and following a rule of life.

I grew up with fairy tales and adventures that ended with some version of “and they lived happily ever after.” It rocked my world when I came across stories that suggested there would be challenges and problems *after* “The End” flashed on screen. I had **never** thought about what happens *after* the long-awaited reunions and hard-won victories.

Perhaps this is the reason there are so many sequels on TV and in the movie theatres these past years. We’ve realized that life isn’t just about hitting the milestones or achieving our goals. Life doesn’t ever stop; it keeps going. So, we want to see how our favorite characters navigate life after the closing credits. This is how we end up with episodes six through nine of the Star Wars movies, a sequel to *Enchanted* called *Disenchanted*, and even *A Christmas Story Christmas*.

Often, our focus is on preparing for THE EVENT.

Twelve years ago, after my baptism, I walked up to the priest who baptized me to thank her.¹ She looked at me and said, “Congratulations! I can’t wait to see what you do next.”

It had taken me so long to get to that point, I thought I was done. Didn’t this make me good with God? What more did God want from me? As it turns out, God wanted a lot more from me. Maybe it’s more accurate to say that God saw more in me than I did. Every time I thought I was done, there was always something more to do, something more to learn, some other decision to make.

Whether we’re making plans for a birth, a wedding, a baptism, or a funeral, it requires so much energy and thought and emotion. There’s not much left over to start the parallel process of laying a foundation for what comes **after**. So, after everyone who came in for the event has left, we find ourselves standing there wondering, “Now what?”

On the first Sunday of Advent, I said the first rule of a rule of life is to talk about having a rule of life. We prepare for endings with practices that help us live with intention and with an awareness of self and others.

On the second Sunday of Advent, I said the second rule is to know the end of life, as in the purpose with which we live our lives. This begins with identifying the fruits we want to bear.

On the third Sunday of Advent, the third rule is that we need to lay the foundation for what comes next. And to prepare for what's next, we need to envision what "next" will look like.

In the season of Advent, we are not just preparing for the first coming of the Messiah, we are preparing for the Second Coming. No one really knows how it will happen, when it will happen, and what it will look like. That makes it *really hard* to prepare for.

Thanks to movies, people standing on sidewalks with huge signs and megaphones, and certain kinds of preachers, when we hear the phrase "Second Coming" we think "rapture" and "apocalypse."

The Greek word behind "apocalypse" actually means "unveiling" or "revelation."² An apocalypse reveals what has been hidden. The introduction to the book of Revelation in the Harper Collins Study Bible explains, "Jewish apocalypses often reflect a sharp distinction between the present evil age and the imminent future age of blessing...After a period of intense conflict and great suffering, God, sometimes acting through a messianic agent, will decisively intervene in history to vindicate and reward God's people and punish or eliminate their earthly oppressors."³

Doesn't that sound likely a good thing? Yet, think about some images that come to mind when I say the word "apocalypse."

-The mushroom cloud of a nuclear blast.

-Lawless dystopias as in the *Mad Max* movies, Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower*, and anything involving zombies.

-Totalitarian dystopias as in 1984, *The Hunger Games*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

-The Four Horsemen galloping our way as cars crash and people disappear, leaving behind only their clothes and accessories.

These are images of the end of the world, or best(?) case scenario, the end of the world as we know it.⁴

This says more about us humans than it says about God. We think the only way to dismantle an empire's house is to use an empire's tools.

Back then, writers of the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation were talking about the Babylonian Empire and the Roman Empire. Today, power and authority look like companies that prioritize their profits over the wellbeing of its employees, its

consumers, and the people and land affected by the way they do business. So, we think about building better companies, more ethical and inclusive companies, maybe a company that has “don’t be evil” in their clause.⁵

Power and authority are bound up with laws and interpretation of laws that enshrine historical iniquities and biases about *whose* rights and *what* rights are protected. ⁶ So, we seek to have the upper hand when it comes to elections and legislations and court decisions.

Power and authority are being exerted by groups that deny the humanity of the neighbors we are called to love, that stir up fear and hate to hold on to *their* vision of the world as it is and should be. So, we try to build community with others who also seek to realize God’s vision of the world as the Kingdom of Heaven.⁷

When we think the only way to counter earthly powers and authorities is to play their games but better, that’s us. That’s not God.

When we associate death and destruction and dystopia with the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, that’s us. That’s not God.

Look at the images from today’s readings from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing” (Isa 35:1-2)

Weak hands shall be strengthened, feeble knees shall grow firm (Isa 35:3 paraphrased).

Those who were excluded from the community by what *other people* perceive as their disabilities or limitations will be restored to the community, thereby making the community whole (Isa 35:5-6 paraphrased).

What if our vision of the justice of God encourages us to dance alongside Mary, and Hannah⁸ before her, and Miriam⁹ before her?

The translation of the Bible called The Message translates those first lines of the Magnificat, found in the gospel according to Luke, as “I’m bursting with God-news; I’m dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one look at me, and look what happened – I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!”¹⁰

No matter how much we humans try, we project human qualities onto God. Even John the Baptist expected the Messiah to counter earthly power and authority with more earthly power and authority.

Last week,¹¹ he gave us the image of an axe lying at the root of the tree, and the threat that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be thrown into the fire. He pictured the

Messiah coming with a winnowing fork, separating the wheat from the chaff, and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. The only way to dislodge an entrenched occupying force, whether they are occupying our lands or our minds, is through force.

So, when he heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he had some questions.

He thought Jesus was the one he was waiting for, but the only kind of cutting down he was doing was taking religious and temple authorities down a notch. He thought Jesus was the one, but he didn't seem to be doing much winnowing and burning. John the Baptist wondered when Jesus was going to do what he really came to do, or rather, what he expected Jesus to do.

Jesus, as he so often did, chose not to answer John's questions directly. This is the message he gave to John's disciples to take back to their teacher, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Mt 11:4-5).

Jesus wasn't focused as much on the earthly powers and authorities as they were focused on him. He didn't play by their rules. He didn't give straight answers to their questions, and he didn't try to outplay them on their terms.

Instead, he went to the poor, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, and the dead. He asked them what they needed for healing and what they needed to be whole. Instead of preparing them for dystopia, destruction, or doom, he prepared for them the way to the Kingdom of Heaven.

That was Jesus' vision of "what comes next."

Death looks like the end, but it is followed by resurrection.

Life ends in death...and is followed by life.

Judgment is followed by opportunities for repentance,
justice by opportunities for redemption.

Apocalypse is followed by the renewal of all of creation...and maybe even dancing.

Our vision of what comes next affects our preparations. It affects the kind of rule of life we develop, the outlook and skills we want to sharpen through practice.

Taking a defensive posture to hold on to what we got looks different from practicing to open our hearts, to share.

Bracing ourselves for scarcity and isolation looks different from practicing for abundance and community.

There's that saying, "Prepare for the worst, and hope for the best."

What if we prepare for the worst **and** for the best?

What if we prepare to endure pain and suffering **and** to laugh and sing again?

What if we prepare for death **and** continue to seek and spark life every single day?

Amen.

¹ Thank you, Jane! <https://www.hmc.ox.ac.uk/people/professor-jane-shaw>

² <https://thevcs.org/keep-awake/little-apocalypse-writ-large?first=7506>

³ Harper Collins Study Bible, New Testament ,p2087

⁴ Yes, this song totally belongs on your Advent Playlist

⁵ <https://gizmodo.com/google-removes-nearly-all-mentions-of-dont-be-evil-from-1826153393>

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/interactive/2022/unwritten-rights-substantive-due-process/>

⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/08/us/power-outage-moore-county-investigation-thursday/index.html>

⁸ The Song of Hannah 1 Samuel 2:1–10

⁹ The Song of Miriam Exodus 15:20-21, or Exodus 15:1-21

¹⁰ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A46-55&version=MSG>

¹¹ Matthew 3:1-12