

Is She Crazy!
The Second Sunday in Advent
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6
December 6, 2015
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The sun sets brilliant pink over Stony Creek and is beautiful in winter: unlike summer when the sunset is often burnt orange and largely obscured by enormous trees, winter's branches are bare, and the sun's reflection on the water has a purplish hue where bright pink meets liquid blue.

As the sky grows dark and everything but a few blinking lights across the water fade to black, I'm reminded of the passing of time: of day into night, of one season into the next.

The season of Advent is upon us. We've been expecting her and have prepared our house for her arrival: the sanctuary has been decorated with twinkling lights and Advent candles, garland and ornaments that reflect our faith.

But it's not all twinkling lights and flickering candles; the scriptures make clear that Advent will ask more of us than a well-lit room. Advent is not soft and gentle but loud and impolite; though we've set a table for her [motion to communion elements] and have invited her in, she chooses to remain outside rather than come in.

How do we know this? By the prophet Isaiah who describes the herald of God as "the voice...crying out *in the wilderness*"—out where things are wild: "Prepare the way of the Lord," Advent screams, "make straight his paths."

We've made a nice straight path down the center of the church [motion down the aisle], but Advent wants us to grab our coats and gloves and go out in the cold and dark *with her!*

Is She *crazy*?

Yes, she is. She wants us to go *out there*: out where people do all kinds of crazy to themselves and to one another.

Clearly, Advent hasn't been watching the news.

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In contrast to the brilliant pink over Stony Creek and the soft white that surrounds the altar are the reports of smoke rising from the scene of *yet another shoot-out*.

There have been 355 mass shootings this year in the United States [alone]. An average of 1 a day. In all but five states. By black shooters, by white shooters, by shooters purporting to be Christians or Muslims. At music festivals...gas stations...block parties...birthday parties...and, as of last Wednesday, office holiday party.ⁱ

How darkly ironic that today we lit the Advent candle of Peace: its flame flickers before us, a wagging a finger, reminding us that all is far from well in our world.

In light of this reality, FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has put together a free, forty-five-minute, online course called: “Active Shooter: What You Can Do.” The course begins with a video which informs us that “an active-shooter event”—an event!—“can occur at any time or place.”

Maybe we do want to grab our coat and gloves.

Cue the doomsday music. Fade to black. “Are you prepared?” the narrator intones.

Clearly not.

Here the video ends, and a FEMA trainer appears on the screen, his tone as undramatic as the narrator’s was melodramatic. He tells us how to prepare ourselves for “an event” by taking one or more of these three “action steps”:

- (1) RUN
- (2) HIDE
- (3) FIGHT

But there are caveats: “If you’re going to run, the training says, keep your hands up in case you meet law enforcement officers. If you’re going to hide, pick a place ‘out of the active shooter’s view.’... [and if you have no other] resort...yell and throw things at the shooter.”ⁱⁱ

The course concludes by encouraging us to “type a list of post-event actions you should take that day and in the coming weeks” and “to develop an after-action report, identifying successes and failures of the incident.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I don’t know which is more disturbing: the strike-terror-in-our hearts, doomsday tone of the narrator or the matter-of-fact-business-as-usual manner of the trainer.

Either way, this video doesn’t help me feel prepared; it leaves me feeling more vulnerable than ever.

But is our Advent message any less frightening?

Listen again to today's scripture from Malachi, and tell me how you feel:

I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will *suddenly come*... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." (3:1-2)

I looked up "fuller's soap" and discovered that a fuller was a person in antiquity who scoured cloth in a mill; the soap used by a fuller was the strongest and most astringent, just as the fire used by a refiner was the hottest and most intense.

The Lord is coming, says Malachi. And it's not going to be pleasant.

As a side note: Malachi's reference to the refiner's fire is in no way connected to the medieval notion of a fiery hell, though being refined by fire, even metaphorically, doesn't sound so great.

If we hope Luke will make things softer, we've come to the wrong gospel writer; Luke dredges up sin and repentance (3:3) and quotes Isaiah's prophecy that "every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth" (3:5).

On the surface, this sounds much better than Malachi, but it's really the same thing: something or someone gets refined, humbled, straightened out or cleaned up. If you are a valley, metaphorically speaking, do you want to be dumped on? If you're a mountain, do you want to be brought low? Even if you know your ego needs some building up or some knocking down, do you want to go through the process of change?

Transformation is hard work, and while it may be exciting, it's most definitely uncomfortable; if not, I dare say, it's not transformation, just a reshuffling of the cards.

Advent, this is supposed to be a happy, pleasant season! Instead you're crying out telling us to prepare ourselves for "the day of God's coming", which sounds a lot more like doomsday than Jesus' birthday. You're sounding a lot more like that FEMA narrator than a messenger of hope and peace.

I'm being facetious; Advent is of course about God coming to us as a baby years ago. But it's also about the hope that God's not finished with us yet—thank God. Thank God it's not only about what was but what is yet to come.

Advent directs us to Christ's birth, yes, but it also pulls us from that halo-lit stable back into the still dark-and-waiting world where we long for what is yet-to-be: for "the crooked [to] be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, [and for all people to] see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:5-6):

It's this second aspect of Advent, this God's-not-finished-with-us-yet aspect that makes me see the candle of Peace not as a mockery of what our world lacks but as a sign of what our world needs and of what our faith believes: namely, that though all is not well in the world all is not lost.

How appropriate that today we light the candle of Peace; it is a profound statement of faith: that even in the midst of the world's crazy, God's peace is born even and will come again to reign at last:

For lo! The days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old,
When with the ever circling years shall come the time foretold,
When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.
("It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," v. 4)

Shall we grab our coats and gloves?

ⁱ Zak, Dan. "The Next Shooting Is Happening Soon. This Online Course Isn't Helping." *The Washington Post*. 3 December 2015.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid