

Apocalyptic Advent

Embracing *Hope* in the
Second Coming of Christ



Advent devotions
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Apocalyptic Advent: Embracing Hope in the Second Coming of Christ

To describe the turbulence and the feelings of our current age, American anthropologist Jamais Cascio coined the acronym BANI: Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible.

Brittle: Systems and structures we thought were stable (our democracy, our economy, our sacred and secular institutions) feel as if they are on the verge of collapsing.

Anxious: Change is occurring rapidly, and options feel limited. We don't know what to do or which way to turn.

Non-linear: Life is not progressing as we thought it would. People are deciding not to have children, civil rights are being rolled back and environmental crises consistently disrupt rhythms of life.

Incomprehensible: Human behavior is baffling. Why do people buy into conspiracy theories? Why is science ignored? Why does injustice go unaddressed? Why can't we agree on common-sense solutions to gun violence? We don't know and can't predict what's going to happen next.

This Advent you, like me, may be wondering how to live in such a time. *What does Jesus say to us in a confusing and chaotic time? How can I adapt to this BANI world and prepare for what is coming?*

Advent, from the Latin *adventus*, means "coming." It is the church's season of preparation, not only for the birth of Jesus at Christmas, but for Christ's second coming. We often treat Christmas as an end, as if all we are waiting for is the birth of Christ and the opening of presents on Christmas morning. After the living room is trashed, full of ripped wrapping paper, and all Santa's cookies have mysteriously disappeared, we've successfully "done" Christmas. But Christmas is a new hope, not an end. We celebrate Jesus' first advent, with an eye toward his second and the way God is actively at work redeeming and renewing our world.

This devotional will highlight and reflect upon apocalyptic passages of the Hebrew Bible, as well as passages in the New Testament that refer to the second coming of Christ. Some Christians use these texts as weapons, stoking fear of end-time judgment in order to convert people to their particular flavor of faith. I'm more interested in the ways people from marginalized communities turn to end-time prophecies for hope in the midst of suffering and struggle. These voices, along with biblical scholars who rightly assert that apocalyptic texts must be read with an understanding of the historical and

cultural context in which they were written, will be the ones this devotion draws on. I'll include a bibliography of resources at the end.

When suffering looms large and we are overwhelmed by the problems of our world, what can we learn from texts that turn us to the future? What can these texts illuminate about the ways we can and should move through our current context? How can these texts prepare and inspire us for a new beginning come Christmas?

Let's get started and see where God's Spirit leads.

With faith in the One who has come and is coming,

Teri McDowell Ott

SAMPLE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4

Isaiah 65: 17-18

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

God hears us and answers. Isaiah 65 testifies to this as God answers the Israelites' cry for help, revealing the plan: a new heaven, a new earth that will bring such joy and delight to God's people, memories of past suffering will fade away and be forgotten.

Recall a time in your life when a new joy overcame or transformed a pain of the past.

I recall the moment my newborn baby was placed in my arms after excruciating labor and delivery; when I transitioned to a new call in ministry, leaving behind a painful place that simply wasn't a good fit. In an everyday context, I feel this release into joy when I intentionally schedule a tiny adventure to relieve the stress of work — a visit to a new art museum, a new trail to explore with my dog, a new friendship to nurture over coffee. We can see these transformations as acts of God's creative work — a part of the plan. God does not desire our suffering. God hears, God acts, God creates anew on our behalf.

For Reflection:

What new creation has brought joy to your life? In what ways has a new creation helped you move forward, setting aside and healing from pains of the past? What new creation would you welcome this Advent? What would you need to do to prepare yourself to receive this new joy?

Breath Prayer (Isaiah 55:12)

Breathe In: You shall go out in joy,

Breathe Out: And be led back in peace

Daniel 7: 7-8

7 After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. 8 I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots. There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.

The first readers of Daniel would have understood the wild images of this text as symbols. Scholars believe the beast in Daniel's dream represented the oppressive Greek ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus was eccentric, power hungry and controversial — the empire grew unstable under his unpredictable reign.

Daniel's dream reflects the Jews' reality — someone is in power over them whom they do not trust and certainly has not earned their respect. We can probably also think of leaders for whom this description fits; leaders who stomp around, asserting their power over others, flashing great teeth in fake smiles while arrogant words fall from their lips.

How do you define power?

In his book *You're More Powerful than You Think*, Peter Liu defines power as “the capacity to ensure that others do as you would want them to do.” If this definition makes you cringe or leaves a bad taste in your mouth, Liu invites you to get over it. “Power is no more inherently good or evil than fire or physics. It just is,” Liu writes. “The only question is whether we will try to understand and harness it.”

Apocalyptic texts arise in contexts of suffering, to empower the oppressed. People, even ordinary people under the thumb of cruel leadership, have the power to resist evil and empire. Daniel's dream reminds his people that God is in this struggle with them. It's a dream that helps coalesce the people around a common vision of hope for their future.

For Reflection:

Where have you witnessed abuses of power? Where have you witnessed power used for good? What power do you hold in your family, your place of work, your church, your community? In what ways can you share your power to promote what is good and faithful?

Breath Prayer (Joel 2:13)

Breathe In: Return to the Lord, your God,

Breathe Out: For he is gracious and merciful,

Breathe In: Slow to anger

Breathe Out: Abounding in steadfast love

SAMPLE

Mark 13:26-27

*26 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.
27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

The climax of Jesus' apocalyptic speech in Mark describes God's final gathering of God's people and is meant to reassure that, despite their suffering, God is ultimately in control. The hardships will not last forever; they must continue in the struggle to establish a righteous and just society, in opposition to Roman imperial order.

There is no greater suffering than that endured alone. Communities build strength and solidarity. During the civil rights movement, Black Americans gathered in churches to fortify themselves with the inspiration needed in their struggle for freedom.

On April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to a few thousand people and described how, during their campaign in Alabama, hundreds of people gathered day after day in Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church before moving out to face the dogs and fire hoses police unleashed on them.

King preached: "And we just went on before the dogs and we would look at them; and we'd go on before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we'd just go on singing 'Over my head I see freedom in the air.' "

King was assassinated the next day. But his faith continues to inspire people in the struggle for justice and freedom. King's last public words to his gathered people were:

"[God's] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land ... I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

For Reflection:

How has God sent you support in the midst of suffering? What did this support feel like? How did it help? What did the future look like knowing you had God's support?

Breath Prayer (Mark 13:27)

Breathe In: Then he will send out the angels

Breathe Out: and gather his elect.

Matthew 28: 19-20

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

When I ran cross country in college, our coach led us through visualization meditations before big races. We'd spread out on the floor of a carpeted classroom and listen to him talk us through the 5-kilometer course, noting when we would hit a sharp turn, a hill or a straight flat stretch. Once, I got a bad case of the giggles at our coach's sing-songy voice as he took us *up* the hill and *down* the hill. But visualization is a proven success strategy of sports psychology. Imagining a successful race actually stimulates the same brain regions as the physical performance. The more you mentally rehearse, or visualize your successful performance, the more you lower competition anxiety and increase the likelihood of staying on top of your game.

Matthew's Great Commission is an invitation to visualize the journey of discipleship and what might be possible before the end of the age. What if all nations, all peoples, not only understood the values of God's kingdom, but shaped our collective life according to them? How would the end of our age look, feel, smell, sound if God's people lived with love, care and respect for each other and our natural world? Jesus tells us to keep this vision of our goal in front of us, and Jesus is with us every step of the way. We do not face this road alone.

For Reflection:

If you were to visualize your life of faith as a running race, what would the course look like? What obstacles or challenges would you meet? When would the finish line appear and what would it look and feel like?

Breath Prayer (Matthew 28:20)

Breathe In: Remember, I am with you always,

Breathe Out: to the end of the age.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters, but already Christians were growing impatient that Jesus had not returned, concerned that members of their community who had died would miss the second coming and life in God's eternal realm. Paul tells them not to worry; both the living and the dead will rise in glory upon Jesus' return.

This text, that describes people being "caught up in the clouds" has been used as the foundation for belief in the Rapture. Introduced in the 1830's by Irish preacher John Nelson Darby, this interpretation was popularized by the 1990's "Left Behind" novels. Darby preached that Jesus would return to earth and snatch all true believers up to heaven, after which there would be seven years of tribulation and destruction before Christ came again.

But a careful reading of 1 Thessalonians 4 doesn't support this idea, and most mainline church scholars have dismissed the Rapture as unbiblical. N.T. Wright is one of the biblical scholars who critiques the Rapture as "escapist" theology. It's easy to deny the needs of our planet, and each other, if all will one day be destroyed—and you get "raptured up" before things get real bad. The community of believers plays an important role in Paul's end-time theology. We are to cooperate with God in transforming the world, not escaping from it.

For reflection:

Have you heard someone speak about their belief in a "rapture?" How did they support their belief? What do you think inspires this belief? What does this belief support?

Breath Prayer (1 Thessalonians 4:18)

Breathe In: Encourage

Breathe Out: One another