“Advent Words – Apocalyptic and Judgment”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

During my study time last month, I took the pleasure of reading several books whose aim is, in part, to help readers understand some of the many words associated with our faith. I did so, anticipating that I would preach during Advent on many of the words I usually associate with our waiting and preparing for Christmas. I was certain that I would likely begin with the word annunciation, because of the angel’s appearing to Mary with the news of her bearing the savior, Jesus. That felt like a fun assignment, as did considering writing and thinking about angels and shepherds, and even weightier words felt fun and even soothing--words like incarnation and salvation. Then I remembered that in this lectionary year, we read the Gospel of Mark and we also begin with prophetic scripture from the Hebrew Bible that reminds us of God’s power and of our frequent disobedience. Reading our lessons from Isaiah and from the 13th chapter of Mark for today, I landed on the words apocalyptic and judgment as significant “church words” from within the text. Sounds like fun, doesn’t it?

Quickly, I would like first to share with you a definition of apocalyptic from the *Britannica Encyclopedia*. “Apocalypticism, eschatological (end-time) views and movements that focus on cryptic revelations about a sudden, dramatic, and cataclysmic intervention of God in history; the judgment of all humanity; the salvation of the faithful elect; and the eventual rule of the elect with God in a renewed heaven and earth.” Do you see why I thought having a vocabulary lesson would be a good idea? It’s a lot of words. The *BibleProject* defines an apocalypse this way: “In the Bible, an apocalypse is what happens when someone is exposed to the transcendent reality of God's perspective. An apocalypse is a confrontation with the divine so intense that it transforms how a person views everything.” Suddenly, the movie Apocalypse Now seems different . . .

So, when we read scripture that we have come to call apocalyptic scripture, we may consider what it is of God that is being revealed as prophetic regarding our eventual judgment and God’s eventual renewal of heaven and earth. All these words! In typical fashion, I wanted to offer you some context regarding the people of Israel having been recently allowed to return from Babylon after the Persian king Cyrus had defeated the Babylonians. That’s the good news that they are responding to in our passage from Isaiah. Instead, having stumbled on old papers in my continual unpacking and discarding, I want to tell you about a movie many of you may have seen. How many of you *have* seen the wonderful Bill Murray vehicle, “Groundhog Day”? I imagine you are as surprised as I was that viewing it was assigned in my Systematic Theology class with a beloved mentor of mine. Perhaps you will be equally as surprised to know that it was remembered to me when, feeling a bit ill this week, I unwound with a movie on Netflix called “The Twelve Dates of Christmas.” The theme of both movies has become a kind of familiar trope, but I don’t think many people conceive of it as a parable about the end times, or, as “Groundhog Day” was assigned to us, in the area of eschatology—a study of the end times.

So, as we consider the possibility of our being judged by God at the end of the world as we know it, even as we long and hope for heaven; as we consider that the fractures and destruction of our current era may be somehow harbingers of the apocalypse, I would like to summarize the plots of these two movies for your consideration of the question we are implicitly posed in our Gospel lesson. If this were your last day on earth, how would you spend it? Or your last month? Or your last year? In what does your greatest hope and joy rest?

Groundhog Day takes place on February 2nd in a year that doesn’t really matter. And while it takes place in Punxatawny, PA, where the groundhog is meant to come up and see or not see his shadow, it’s kind of a timeless story. I use the word quite intentionally, because the whole premise is that Bill Murray, who is kind of a nasty weather reporter or correspondent, wakes up each morning with the same Sonny and Cher song, “I Got You Babe,” on the radio, at the same hour without change in that moment. He repeats the same day again and again. So that I can talk about both movies simultaneously, “The Twelve Dates of Christmas,” in a familiar trope made possible by “Groundhog Day,” a young woman who longs to find true love is ending a relationship and there is a hope of a new one. But she repeats the same day, day after day, waking up on the same floor of a department store. What happens in the course of both movies, without getting into specifics [I think you will forget enough about the details that it will be just as joyful if you watch it on your own.], is that the people learn what they would do with a day in which there is no consequence, or seemingly no consequence at the end of it. What if there were no judgment, but you could just live one day over and over again. That is one way of looking at the movies.

Bill Murray (who as I said is really not a very nice guy) spends day after day thinking just how lavishly he can live, taking from everyone he sees, even causing intentional harm to people. There are funny scenes and we are invited to laugh along with him. Finally, though, he realizes that the object of his affection [It is another Rom-Com, after all.] is not moved by all those things. He eventually learns in the course of his repeated day that the best effect he has for himself and his heart is actually being kind, and generous, and meeting the needs of others. Likewise, with the woman who is sure she is meant to be with her former boyfriends, she tries to recreate all the moments she has interacted with him so that she can “fix” the perfect day, and then learns that leaving herself open to new possibilities and using her repeated day to help the others in whose path she stumbles, gives her the greatest joy and the greatest hope. I recommend the movies to you for their wonderful vision of the eschatological reality.

For the *apocalypse* that we expect when we look at the world today and are concerned, frightened, angry, sad at the fractures, at the violence, at the understandable worry . . . there exists in this moment, too, the presence of Jesus, the one for whom we wait and for whom we prepare. I like to hope that we do this as Jesus asks us, as modeled by Bill Murray and the actress whose name I don’t know in the “Twelve Dates of Christmas,” in doing all that they can for others and finding that those are the things that most feed them and engender real, deep love. So, the apocalypse, that transcendent connection with God for which we wait, we have tastes of even now. We see it when we live as Jesus would have us live—lovingly, generously, and joyfully. So, in this Advent season I invite you, in fact, to a time of fast, where we give up those things that draw us away from all that joy and all that hope, and lean into prayer, to study, to encounters with our transcendent God. Amen.