

## The State of Things

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

A few years ago around this time of year, we were driving through our neighborhood when Nina, maybe 6 years old at the time, yelled out, "Uhhhhh....Daddy, it's the day after Thanksgiving and only one house on our street has put up Christmas lights. There should be at least 6 houses decorated by now."

Our kids, like I imagine most kids love Christmas. They love the decorations. They love the lights. They love looking at presents under the tree. And to be perfectly honest with you, I love this time of year too, primarily because I love seeing how excited Nina and Julian are. I love seeing the excitement they have in decorating the tree or the expectation of seeing Christmas lights, or the really great family time of watching Christmas movies together. And if I'm not careful, then I start believing all the messages we hear all around us this time of year.

You know what messages I'm talking about: It's the most wonderful time of the year. It's the time when we all should be nothing but joyful. And if you really want to make it super joyful, spend a lot of money shopping. Right?

Now don't get me wrong – it's not that any of these messages are wrong in and of themselves. For many families, this is a wonderful and joyful time of the year and there is something sweet about giving the people we love gifts. The problem, though, is that these messages we hear lack nuance. Because for many, this is not a wonderful time, but an all too painful reminder of loss. And sometimes we can lose sight of all that is broken in our world, numbed to the pain all around us by nostalgic images of Santa pics and chestnuts roasting.

Last week, we heard the terrible news of a man plowing through a Christmas parade in Wisconsin, killing six and injuring dozens. Many of us worry about what kind of world our kids or grandkids will inherit as climate change threatens to upend life as we know it. And there seems to be a global struggle between democracy and authoritarianism that we're not really sure how will end. Or for some of us, we don't even have the energy to worry about these macrolevel things as it feels our personal lives are falling apart. The loss of a loved one. An unwelcome diagnosis. A child that is really struggling and we feel helpless to do anything about it. The truth is we live in a world that is filled with beauty and joy but also filled with devastating pain and hurt.

The way our culture prepares for Christmas simply can't take into account the state of these things – because to look at the world as it actually is would mess with our most wonderful time of the year theme.

But Christians don't look to this naïve approach as our way of preparing for Christmas. Instead, in the Christian year, we prepare for Christmas by going through Advent. The Advent lectionary readings begin not with a vision of joy, but rather with a prediction of destruction. Jesus warned, "People will faint from fear and

foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." Far too often, these passages are interpreted as if Jesus is talking about some distant day in the future when Jesus returns for the second time, but Jesus didn't have to wait thousands of years for his words to ring true. Jesus and his people lived a fragile existence right then. At any moment the Roman Empire could descend upon them with the full weight of their power and crush them. And that they did a few years after Jesus' life in the year 70AD when they sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. This was the second time the temple was destroyed as the Babylonians did so 600 years earlier.

And yet, even while predicting Jerusalem's destruction, Jesus did not do so without also offering hope. He says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." This is vastly different from the most wonderful time of year message we hear all around us. This is a message that takes seriously the way things are. All is not well. The world is a mess. Far too many of God's children suffer under the weight of oppression and injustice. Advent begins by naming the way things are. It begins by acknowledging the reality of suffering all around us. And the hope it offers is not one that turns a blind eye to that suffering but a hope that is stronger than the suffering. In other words, it is a real hope – not a sanitized one.

Jesus was not the first person to speak both of the current state of things and a hope even in the midst of suffering. Virtually all of the prophets before him did so as well. In our first reading, the prophet Jeremiah lived in a very similar time as Jesus. Just as Jesus lived right before the Romans would destroy Jerusalem, Jeremiah lived as the Babylonians were about to destroy Jerusalem and the temple for the first time. And as the Babylonians held the city of Jerusalem in siege, as their destruction and the death of many was imminent, Jeremiah proclaimed, "The Days are Surely Coming...Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety."

Like Jesus, Jeremiah was not offering a naïve hope. He was not suggesting that in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, the Babylonians would change their mind and turn around. This was the same prophet who condemned false prophets for saying, "Peace, peace when there is no peace." The hope Jeremiah offers, the hope Jesus offers, the hope of Advent is not to say, "Well, the world really isn't as bad as it seems." Rather, the hope of Advent is to say, "The world can be really, really bad. What you're going through can be really really bad. But God can even bring hope in the midst of this." Even as the Babylonians destroy the temple, there is hope even in this. Even as the Romans sack our city, there is hope even in this. Even as we hear of a mass shooting seemingly every time we turn on the TV, even as we hear the dire predictions of a changing climate, even as we hear of yet another mutation of COVID they may be vaccine resistant, even when it feels like your world is falling apart and nothing you do can make things better, even then, there is hope. Advent dares to stare the pain of the world right in the face and hope anyway.

But let me be careful here. Because the hope I just proclaimed for our world comes from a very different place than the hope Jesus and Jeremiah proclaimed. My

proclamation of hope comes from a place of safety and privilege. Whereas they proclaimed hope while also suffering from the evil that was coming. Jesus would be crucified by the same empire that destroyed the temple. And Jeremiah would spend much of his life in prison. They didn't offer hope from a safe distance, but instead offered hope in the midst of suffering alongside their people.

And I think that is both the hope and the challenge of Advent for us – to not keep a safe distance but to live and act out of hope alongside those who suffer. Advent is a time of waiting. We are waiting on Christmas, waiting on the birth of Jesus, waiting for the reign of God to be realized on Earth as it is in heaven. But it's not a passive waiting where we just sit back until God does God's thing. Rather, it's an active waiting where we live into the reality of God's hope while working for it to be fully realized. In the chapter before our Jeremiah reading, the prophet bought a field. Now, it made no logical sense for Jeremiah to buy land that was about to be conquered by the enemy. My guess is the Babylonians weren't going to honor Jeremiah's bill of sale. But he bought land anyway because he believed that one day his people would return. He wasn't just proclaiming hope, he was quite literally putting his money where his mouth was.

When I was in seminary, I had the chance to meet Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The first thing I noticed about him is that he was so short. Y'all, he made me look tall. But the second is that his very presence exuded kindness. And yet, he was one of the most bold and powerful prophets of the last century. When he led demonstrations against the apartheid government, the security forces would come out and tear gas them or beat them with clubs and in the midst of all that chaos, Bishop Tutu would say to the apartheid forces,

“Come join us.

We are winning.

Come join us.

We are winning.”

Now if you lived in a high rise apartment looking down on these demonstrations, you'd think Desmond Tutu had lost his mind. It did not look like they were winning. It looked like they were getting beaten and gassed and arrested. And yet, we know the end of the story. Apartheid collapsed. Bishop Tutu was right. They were, in fact, winning the whole time. You see, he was able to see the present state of things in light of God's promised future.

That's the hope of Advent. During this season of waiting, we are invited not to naively say all is well, but to honestly look at the state of things. We are invited to look at all of the world's pain, all of the world's violence, all of the world's injustice and to work to resist it – resist the evil and the injustice and the oppression that is so pervasive and in the midst of that resistance dare to proclaim, “Come join us we're winning. For the days are surely coming.”

Amen.

