

First Sunday of Advent (Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9)

The preacher must remind those who feel worthless already that Isaiah is not trying to make them feel worse.

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [November 15, 2005](#) issue



Isaiah, Divi-Blasii-Kirche, Mühlhausen.

The most prophetic thing that Thomas Merton ever did was to say to a drugstore clerk who asked him which brand of toothpaste he preferred, "I don't care." Intrigued by the clerk's response, Merton wrote, "He almost dropped dead. I was supposed to feel strongly about Colgate or Pepsodent or Crest. . . . And they all have a secret ingredient." He concluded that "the worst thing you can do now is not care about these things."

Merton wrote in the early 1960s, long before the art of making us care about “the secret ingredient” had so aggressively entered into every aspect of American life. We can’t ride a bus, open a magazine or go online without being asked to consider which insurance company offers the best rates or which paper towel picks up the most dirt. Advent is a good time to reclaim our senses and reply with a resounding, “I don’t care!”

During Advent the voices of the prophets come through loud and clear. In preparing us for the coming of God in human form, God calls out the big guns to get our attention. And what better, if unwelcome, wake-up call than Isaiah proclaiming that “we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.” Just what we want to hear on a Sunday morning, as part of the good news—thanks be to God—that is proclaimed and pondered in church.

When such readings are proclaimed, pastors become jugglers with way too many balls in the air. Advent means preparing ourselves to celebrate not only the birth of Jesus but his second coming, an event which does not lend itself to nostalgia or glad carols. When Isaiah tells us that even our good intentions and actions can be worthless in God’s sight, the pastor must remind those in the family who feel worthless already that Isaiah is not trying to make them feel worse. The good news is that we are all in this together.

The prophets provide cold clarity about what it means to be God’s people, and what our responsibilities are to each other and to this awesome God. How remarkable that God refuses to give up on us. How amazing that even after we have had tears “in full measure,” this is the God to whom we pray: “Come, save us.” This is the God who has promised to come to us.

How often in extremity have we prayed, “Give us life, that we may call upon your name,” making an implicit promise to use our lives to better purpose next time, to resist the temptations to sloth, anger, pride, greed, malice and everything else that would deflect us and diminish our better selves. I once saw this prayer crudely but effectively expressed in a bumper sticker on a beat-up car in Williston, North Dakota: “O Lord, Give Us Just One More Oil Boom. We Promise Not to Piss It Away This Time.” We’re not laughing at you, God, but *with* you. Maybe weeping a little, too.

The passage from 1 Corinthians is helpful as a mirror to Isaiah, as Paul also addresses what it means to be God’s people, specifically those who are members of

the body of Christ. What a blessing it is to hear, “I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Jesus Christ.” We might employ this affirmation during Advent in place of the exchange of peace. Who knows what might happen if the strangers, friends, enemies and indifferent parties who make up any congregation on a Sunday morning could say this to one another, and discover that they mean it?

Paul assures us that God has already given us the strength we need to bear whatever comes our way in life, and I need it when I listen to today’s gospel, which is the sort of Bible passage that is often used as a bludgeon to terrify people into believing in a God who, as Roberta Bondi once put it, loves you so much he’s gonna get you if you don’t watch out! This is the scary God who comes in the night, the God who delighted my Grandmother Norris and worried her son, my uncle, because he wanted to play baseball in the morning and not have to deal with the end of time.

The weary pastor might stop juggling and offer a refresher course on the meaning of apocalypse, which, though it comes from the depths of human desperation, is meant to bring us hope. The late poet Czeslaw Milosz placed his own writing in “that stream of catastrophist literature which attempts to overcome despair.” Isaiah’s “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down” is the cry of a people who realize that they’ve made such a mess of the world that only God can set it right. And this reflects a truth of personal experience: that it’s only after a crisis, with the stars falling from our sky and the ground shaking beneath our feet, that we see clearly—that we remember what is worth caring about and what is not.

The word *apocalypse* simply means to reveal, to uncover, and if facing reality brings us despair, we need to ask why. Above all, we must reject the literalist notion that apocalyptic literature is about a future pie in the sky. It is a command to come to full attention in the here and now. And that is hard to do. Last year one advertisement for a beaded handbag costing thousands of dollars featured a model with her eyes closed, looking beautiful but comatose, as the words “Comfort and Joy” blazed across the page. Let’s keep our own eyes open, and as we prepare to sing of comfort and joy this year, let’s look for them where they may be found.