

Punctured: Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

by [James Alison](#) in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

One of the things I love about the liturgical life of the church is the way that the Holy Spirit, quietly and gently, works on us. Through the texts and prayers set out each year in the lectionary the Spirit draws us ever more fully into the Presence. If we read the texts in a literalistic manner, it can sound as though week by week it is God who is undergoing change toward us. In fact, however, in the liturgy of the Presence it is we who are worked on through the scriptures and the prayers, we who get to be reconfigured and brought into the life of the changeless One.

At Advent, it begins again: the cycle by which God breaks through the clutter of our lives to announce to us that the Presence is very near, irrupting into our midst, hauling us out of our myths, our half-truths and the ways we have settled for what is religious rather than what is holy, alive and real. So lest we be tempted to think that Advent is merely a religious warm-up for Christmas, let us see if we can allow ourselves to be brought near the cold-water spigot whose splashes can chasten us into reality.

Someone wants to speak to us—Someone who is not on the same level as us. The oomph behind the “isness” of everything that is wants to invite us into the fullness of a project. Can that One get through? Will we be able to hear that One? How trained are our ears? The assumption at the beginning of each liturgical year is that this is going to be difficult—that we are half asleep, our ears dulled, and the voice of One who loves us is too radiantly bright to be picked up on our defensive antennae. Hence St. Paul’s call for awakening, the great leitmotif of Advent. Not a moralistic call, despite Paul’s immediate listing of examples of downward-spiraling desire. A call for us to be quickened, straightened into hearing One who is not part of the world of our entrapment by and scandal at each other, so that we who are inclined to settle for less can be summoned into the joy of more by One who loves us.

The announcement with which we begin plays to our sense of the physically portentous. Isaiah gives us a mountain which is being lifted up. It plays to our sense of religious grandeur, for the mountain is Zion, where Jerusalem is built. It plays to any apocalyptic sense we may have, for out of this physically and religiously

charged place there is to emerge a teaching and an instruction which will also be a judgment, a criterion for all peoples. And this judge, sitting with authority, will be heeded by all nations, who will then enter into the ways of peace.

Will we survive the collapse of our fantasy? How wonderful it would be to have a religion in which something as obvious as a great mountain lifted itself up—a mountain associated with the things of God, a new Sinai from which a lawgiver and a judge would hand out decrees whose wisdom everybody would recognize and to which they would submit meekly. Or would it be so wonderful? Maybe as long as we fantasize like this, we will never be able to learn the things that make for peace. For in the reality constructed by human imagination, the reality of a thousand national identities, foundational myths, bogus perceptions of “our” innocence and “their” wickedness, who could ever be a judge whose impartiality would be recognized and whose arbitration would be accepted?

So what is the sense of the prophecy? We are used to two possibilities: on the one hand, prophecy being punctured by reality, and our settling for far less than our imaginations were excited into expecting; or on the other hand, prophecies being fulfilled, and a boost being given to our expectations and our sense of who we are and what we deserve.

Advent gives us neither of these. Or perhaps it would be better to say that we are given both. What we are going to get used to hearing is the still small voice of punctured fulfillment; that is to say, we will receive far more than we imagined we might get from the prophecy, but we will get it through the loss of fantasy. This is what our Lord warns his disciples about: the coming is not going to happen according to our measure, nor is it likely to be picked up by us. Only the spirit that is trained in punctured fulfillment is likely to get it.

Jesus points it out very clearly: there is no human criterion at all that is capable of knowing how the Creator’s design to fulfill creation is going to look. Majority expectations are not safe, like those of Noah’s contemporaries. Who could tell that with Cain killing Abel in the field (one taken, the other left) judgment would begin? Or what the shape of that judgment would be? Who could tell with the deaths of the firstborn of the Egyptian slave women working alongside their Hebrew counterparts at the grinding stone (Ex. 11:5) that a sign from God was about to emerge?

And yet, as our imagination of the One who is coming undergoes its inevitable puncturing so we can be awakened to One whose criteria are not our criteria, the

promise will be fulfilled. The One who is coming will not preside over us but will teach us to want peace from within and to learn the habits that make it possible. Thus we may be saved from remaining wedded to our self-destruction.