

The prophet's candle

As the first Advent candle is lit, world leaders will be making their way to Paris to try to create a climate treaty.

by [Ragan Sutterfield](#) in the [November 25, 2015](#) issue



Photo by Manuela Weschke

The first candle of the Advent wreath is known in some traditions as the “hope candle” or the “prophet’s candle.” It reminds us of the prophets of Israel who looked forward to God doing something new in the world, who saw that change was coming—and that this change would ultimately be a renewal.

As the prophet’s candle is lit on the first Sunday of Advent, leaders from more than 190 nations will be making their way to Paris. The next day, the Paris Climate Conference—COP21—will convene with the goal of creating the first legally binding international climate treaty. The juxtaposition presents preachers with an opportunity.

The climate is in crisis, and the evidence is clear: it’s our fault. The year 2014 was the warmest in recorded climate history, a record that 2015 is on track to break. Sea

levels have risen to the point where many low-lying nations are actively looking to move their people to higher ground. Natural disasters are getting worse. And this is all happening before global temperatures reach 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels—what many scientists identify as a point of no return.

In the lectionary's Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent, Jesus warns of "distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves" (Luke 21:25). I asked Bill McKibben for his thoughts on this passage. "The roaring and the tossing of the seas is already perplexing and anguishing us," the climate activist replied. "On an ocean planet we've managed in short order to make the seas 30 percent more acidic; their level is rising rapidly, and it appears we've started the irreversible melt of Greenland and the West Antarctic." McKibben added that new research indicates that "if we burned all our fossil fuel, it will eventually raise the level of the oceans 200 feet."

Like the first hearers of the Gospel of Luke, we are in a time of crisis and upheaval brought on by hubris. Then it was Rome; now it's the global economy. The two share the aim of extracting as much wealth as possible from the earth—even at the expense of its people and of the whole of creation. But the power of fossil fuels has increased the scale of extraction beyond what Rome could have imagined. This has brought us into what many are calling the "Anthropocene"—the human age—because never before has the whole earth been so formed by human activity. Our age is set in opposition to the biblical claim that the earth is the Lord's.

Luke Timothy Johnson writes that this passage of Luke concerns the "worldwide experience of humans at the judgment." It is a judgment that is cosmological and ecological, because from the curse of Genesis 3 to the eschatological longing of Romans 8, humanity is tied up with the creation of which we are a part. Neither can be renewed without the other; our fates are bound up together. "People's suffering will also be echoed in the known spheres of creation," writes Michael Trainor. "All Earth's members without exception will experience catastrophic distress."

And yet Luke seems to be saying that the catastrophe will be a surprise—that people will miss the signs or, worse, ignore them. We do not want to see the outcomes of our fossil-fuel economy. We are so committed to the way of life it supports that we would rather drive blindly forward, perhaps in a Prius, than make fundamental changes. And this may well be what we see at COP21: a global effort to preserve the systems of ecological injustice, rather than bold action to avoid the chaos that will

make people “faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.”

“But what if ‘what is coming’ has already come?” This was Sallie McFague’s response to my questions about the lectionary reading. Following philosopher Timothy Morton, McFague wonders if the catastrophe has already arrived—in “the humiliation of facing up to reality, that we are not in charge of the world, but are simply having to live with what we have done to the world by refusing to live within its ecological rules.” Luke’s “fear and foreboding” may already be with us, she suggested, in “our realization that we have been living a lie, living within a worldview that is destroying our planet.”

Like the fall of Babylon in Revelation 18, our consternation at disaster is a sign of where we fall in the judgment. Will we be like the kings and merchants who prospered from Babylon’s injustice and so mourn its loss? Or will we be like the children of God who rejoice at the justice that comes in Babylon’s destruction? Will we see the roaring of the seas as the tragic end of our way of life, or as a hopeful and necessary clearing for renewal?

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees,” says Jesus. See the sign of what God is ushering into the world. This is an image of “harvest-as-*kairos*,” as biblical scholar Ched Myers put it to me; the trees show us the time that is at hand. Several studies have shown that tree species are beginning to change their ranges in response to climate change. In 2012 the U.S. Department of Agriculture revised its plant hardiness zone map—figs can now be planted farther north than ever before. If we look to the trees, we will see the signs of the creation unraveling in response to our way of life.

“The notion of nature’s rebellion against imperial transgressions is as old as the plagues of Egypt,” noted Myers, “while its sudden eclipse of social order (‘like a thief in the night’) was a primal trope for the early church.” Today, he said, the climate crisis has made such biblical signs into a “historic ultimatum.” This crisis is both catastrophe and the ushering in of a new order. Painful though it may be, climate change offers a call for the church to wake up to the injustice at the heart of our modern, industrial way of life—and to embody a radical alternative, in which we welcome these threats to our way of life as a call to change, to seek the flourishing of all creation.

After COP21, will the nations choose to look to the fig tree and change their ways accordingly? Either way, it falls to the church to see the signs—and to live in this new reality even if the nations are stuck in the old one. Staying awake means becoming communities of resilience and transition. It means ministering to neighbors when the life of meaning they built in their dream home is lost to flood waters. It means drawing on the skills of our elders as we learn to live on a smaller scale, holding food preservation workshops in our church kitchens or growing food on our church lawns. It means creating communities of forgiveness and repentance as we all face our complicity in this climate catastrophe.

Advent is a time to prepare—to form our common life so that the coming of God's kingdom is less of a culture shock to lives too comfortable in the world that is passing away. This means, on the whole, living on a smaller scale within a smaller radius. It also means that we should be ready to challenge the systems that refuse to change course in the face of this ecological unraveling, this judgment of our own making.

A lack of action in Paris this Advent will require faithful communities to discern their response. This could be something like a Christmas boycott of the global consumer economy—a choice to welcome the gift of Christ who brings peace on earth instead of the so-called gifts of an economy that makes peace harder. For all the urgency of crisis, such an action would bear a message of hope. The economy of extraction cannot last; cosmic catastrophe will bring it to a halt. But communities of love, well practiced in the skills of neighborliness and charity, will know that the fulfillment of God's great promises is close at hand. As the rising seas confuse the nations, stay alert to God's working.