

Advent's Sweet and Fragile Flame

[OR "Come Emmanuel" May Not Mean What You Think It Means]

Mark 13:24-37, Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-4, 7, 17-19, and 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on December 3, 2023

Advent begins with lighting a single candle. Sweet and fragile is its flame. A ritual signifying a beginning, its soft light ironic given Jesus' intensity with his disciples. And so begins our church year, plunked into the beginning of the end of Mark's gospel, just before Jesus' anointing by an unknown woman and his last Passover meal with his friends before the crucifixion – the beginning of Jesus' end.

Jesus had been teaching at the temple. As he was leaving, one of his followers struck up a conversation with him. They walked to the Mount of Olives, across from the temple, and took a seat. A few more people from Jesus' inner circle joined them – Peter, James, John, and Andrew.¹ He talked with them about dark and chaotic times just before the events of the cross began.² Jesus' taught them about the upcoming chaos for which the disciples were to keep awake. Much of what Jesus is alluding to seems to be about the cross as the apocalyptic revelation.³ As one example, he tells time the same way that the crucifixion story does – evening, midnight, cockcrow, or dawn.⁴ And, in the very next chapter of Mark, after telling them to stay awake as he prayed in a garden, Jesus caught these very same disciples asleep.⁵

What is a well-intended Jesus follower to make of his teaching? Stay awake even though you won't be able to? That can't be right. Or, if it is right, it's only partly right. It is true that staying awake and being vigilant all the time isn't humanly possible, so we've got that going for us. The events of the cross likely seemed like the end times to the disciples. But, more importantly, the cross promises that the end of all things is also a beginning that we cannot imagine.

¹ Mark 13:1-3

² Mark chapters 14 and 15.

³ See my full sermon on the cross as apocalypse here: [November | 2014 | Caitlin Trussell](#)

⁴ Mark 14:32-52 (evening in the garden); Mark 14:53-65 (midnight, examined by the high priest); Mark 14:66-72 (cockcrow, denied three times by a friend); Mark 15:1-20 (dawn, condemned to die); Mark 15:33 (Jesus' crucifixion, death on the cross, and burial: Mark 15:21-47).

⁵ Mark 14:32-42 The disciples fall asleep three times in the garden as Jesus is praying.

God's imagination, now that's something worth anticipating and worth waiting for. In Advent, we sing Come Emmanuel. Emmanuel means God with Us. We call on God to come now. Our call is laced with dissatisfaction, disillusionment, and disgust over our current predicament. Yet again, we are caught in sin and systems that seem beyond anyone's capacity to reimagine. But there are moments, glimmers of possibility, sweet and fragile as an Advent flame.

Last Wednesday, a multifaith service of quiet, music, and candle lighting was held in our Sanctuary. All of us there numbered 113. Included in that attendance were Sunni, Shia, and Ismaili Muslims, a variety of Christians, Palestinians, and several rabbis and a few of their congregants. We were quite a mix of humanity. Few words were spoken. There are things to learn and do differently if there is a next time. But it was really something to watch people of that many different backgrounds light candles and stabilize them in the sand next to each other. Those moments together were a paradox of being at the heart of the struggle and buffered from it. A risk as sweet and fragile as an Advent flame.

Risking an unknown future is part of what it means to call on God's imagination while singing Come Emmanuel. As the prophet Isaiah calls on God to tear open the heavens and come down, there's a risk taken alongside the confession of the people's sin. Inviting God to call us to account is no small thing. We are not left unchanged when God shows up. Protected parts of ourselves that we cradle in mangers of our own making are laid bare in front of a God who knows what we keep tucked away from public view. Layers of self-protection are as dried hay through Advent's sweet and fragile flame.

Our strains of Come Emmanuel harmonize with the psalmist's song, "Restore us, O God, let your face shine on us, and we shall be saved." We could use more than a little saving from ourselves right about now. Collectively we keep missing the mark on the basics of humanity. There are around 2,500 billionaires in the world while somewhere between 1 - 2 billion people live in poverty.⁶ We're all a part of this world. To sing Come Emmanuel, to ask God's face shine on us, is to illuminate powers and principalities in which we're accidental or actual participants as the high-tech fibers in paper money shimmer in Advent's sweet and fragile flame.

⁶ www.forbes.com/billionaires/ and www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/societal-poverty-economics-development-finance-sdgs/

Advent is strangely short on time this year. We typically light four Advent candles for the four Sundays before Christmas Eve. This year Christmas Eve is on a Sunday, three weeks from now. The churchy, liturgical way to say this is that Advent 4 is in the morning and Christmas Eve is, well, in the evening. This year, we've chosen to have only Christmas Eve services on Sunday the 24th starting at 11 a.m. Here's your invitation to light that fourth Advent candle at home on Christmas Eve morning. Even if you don't have anything that resembles an Advent wreath, just light one candle, any color. Before the fullness of the day, before the tracking of Santa's sleigh, there is a larger more subversive claim in Advent's sweet and fragile flame.

Those sweet and fragile flames are deeply subversive. Lighting Advent candles is also a ritual of comfort. Advent is a paradox. We sing with longing, Come Emmanuel, while we're assured of Christ's presence with us in bread, wine, and baptismal waters, and while we're assured of Christ's presence with us in God's call "into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord," as 1 Corinthians describes it. We are not alone. God IS with us. It may just be less like chestnuts roasting on an open fire and more like the light of Advent's sweet and fragile flame. Come, Emmanuel.