Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





by Pat Marrin

View Author Profile
patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“Your redemption is at hand” (Luke 21:28).

Jer 33:14-16; Ps 25; 1 Thes 3:12—4.2; Luke 21:25-28, 34-38

First Sunday of Advent

As the church comes around the liturgical calendar once again to Advent, we might wonder if we aren’t just going in circles. Jesus is coming again, even as the early church longed for his imminent return in the *Parousia.* When will we know and experience his presence for real? The answer to this question depends on how we understand what happened when Jesus appeared to the first disciples after his resurrection.

One theology says that what Jesus began now awaits completion in history. We who believe in him live in expectation of the reign of God that is both already here and not yet. We live in the spirit of the Beatitudes, blessed in our meekness but hoping to inherit the earth, in our sorrow but waiting to be comforted, hungry for justice and peace, assured we will someday be satisfied and as peacemakers revealed to be the children of God. This future-gazing calls us to be patient and faithful for what will come at the end of time.

Another theology, espoused by scripture scholar Gerhard Lohfink in his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, offers us a much more challenging understanding of what Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection. During his earthly ministry, Jesus did not promise his disciples a future Kingdom of God or New Creation but proclaimed it as already present because the kingdom was happening and present within them.

This reality was fully revealed in Jesus when he appeared to them as the risen Christ. But his message was not that something wonderful had happened just for him but also for them. The church was also being transformed within a whole new reality. His death and resurrection had opened the way here and now for them to begin living their new destiny as God's children. Jesus was already living this new life, and by baptism his followers were already incorporated into his risen body, breathing his Holy Spirit and sharing his redemptive power to transform the world.

So, what we celebrate at Advent is not that we are going in circles but as our turn on an upward spiral of the same new life for our generation that the first generation was invited to claim. Advent invites us believe that our hidden lives in Christ are who we really are, fully empowered to be his presence in 2021. Every grace Jesus shared with his first disciples is ours today, because the reign of God is neither in the past nor in the future but right now. If there is anything absent to our full experience of the risen Jesus, it is on our part for lack of faith, not on God's part, for, as St. Paul attested, today is the day of salvation, and now is always the hour of empowerment through the Holy Spirit. We need only believe that what we pray for as the church is already given and that if we act in the name of Jesus, he acts with us and through us.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is describing the end of one world and the beginning of another. We live in the age of grace and the fullness of time. If this seems impossible, we have yet to live it fully. In the words of G.K. Chesterton, "Christianity was not tried and found wanting, but found difficult and therefore not tried." If we imagine the resurrection as only future glory, we have not understood the saints, who surrendered themselves fully, even their sufferings united with those of Jesus, to reveal God's glory already present and at work in the world.

The image of Advent as waiting for the birth of Jesus Christ means that conception has occurred, and God is already within us. We mark these holy weeks eager to welcome the One who is already with us. We prepare, knowing that what we long for and endure birth pangs to receive has already changed our lives completely and will continue to challenge us to live differently because of it.

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