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Fleming Rutledge: Advent Begins Where Human Potential Ends

This season invites us to turn our face toward the future of God, not man.

FLEMING RUTLEDGE/POSTED DECEMBER 17, 2019

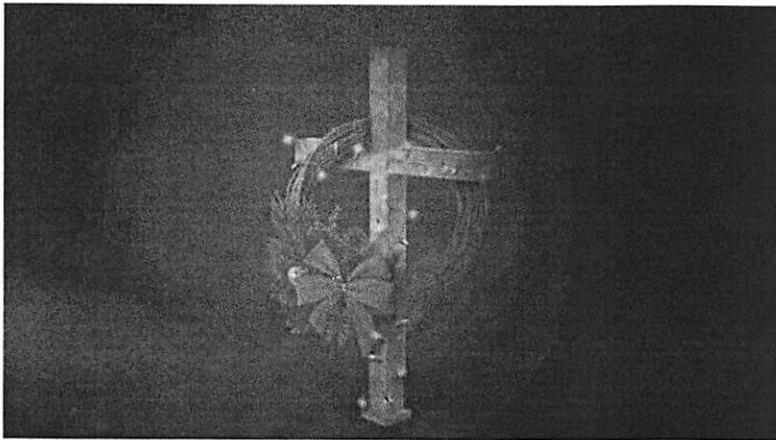


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Across the Charles River from the Church of the Advent sits mighty Harvard. There, the famous psychology professor Steven Pinker thinks the world is getting better. In a [recent interview](#), he makes the statement that, thanks to the Enlightenment and especially to science, life on earth is improving. He acknowledges that human beings “tend to backslide into irrationality,” but all in all, he thinks the data show that we’re making headway. Pinker is not ignorant about human evil, but he genuinely believes that human progress is unstoppable and that science and technology can solve our problems if we can only be rational, high-minded people—presumably, people like himself.

The Bible pushes back against the naive optimism of Pinker and many others like him. It is a story, not a scientific document or a collection of spiritual principles. It tells us how we came to be who we are in this world, how we fractured the image of God in ourselves by our rebellion, and how our creator came in his own person to transfigure us into the likeness of the son, who became incarnate in our human flesh. It tells us of the powers of sin and death and their hold on us.

The biblical story is rigorously unsentimental. It doesn't offer optimism. It doesn't offer "positive thinking." It looks deeply into human misery, human folly, human pain, and plain old human disappointment. I like what the writer Lance Morrow said about the 20th century era of world wars and genocide: "Instead of a growing Enlightenment, it seems more like an Endarkenment."

The Advent season, properly understood, is designed to help us understand this "Endarkenment." It strengthens us for life in the real world, where there are malignant forces actively working against human well-being and the divine purposes of God. This is a world in which no one seems to know what to do about the catastrophic famine in Yemen. This is a world in which the promise of freedom and democracy in Poland and Hungary is shifting before the eyes of the world into oppression and autocracy. This is a world in which our very best intentions turn against us.

Advent always begins in the dark. But there is a "but," and we find it revealed in the story that the scriptures tell.

Generally speaking, everything in the Bible can be understood as pre-Exile and post-Exile. Before the Babylonians came and conquered the Hebrew nation, laid waste to the temple, and carried the people far away into exile in a pagan land, the promises of God seemed secure. The land of milk and honey was in their possession.

But God's people did not live according to the will of God. They became indifferent to the poor, they perverted the system of justice, and they turned to foreign gods. God's judgment, long delayed by God's mercy, descended upon them in the form of the Babylonian hordes, and they were taken away to the land where those foreign gods reigned supreme. Or so it seemed. The challenge to the supremacy—even the very existence of the God of Israel—was overwhelming. The entire Hebrew project seemed to be at an end.

This historical situation is illustrated in the first eight chapters of Zechariah. The prophet looks for a king who will restore the fortunes of Israel, but he's prophesying about an earthly, human king, Zerubbabel. This view is typical of the pre-Exile biblical mentality: The promises of God will take place within history.

After chapter 8, however, we are in the post-exilic world, and the biblical theology changes. The chapters in the second half of the book move us into a different worldview that we call *apocalyptic*. Don't be put off by this word; it doesn't have the same meaning as it does in our culture. It's actually a biblical word. In Greek the word *apocalypse* means *revelation*.

Before the Exile, the thinkers of Israel looked to history for their hopes for the future. They had a lot of data that strengthened their conviction about the faithfulness of God in the history of their people. They were confident, secure, flexing their muscles, certain of their standing, heedless of the warnings of the pre-exilic prophets like Jeremiah. After the exile, the prophets began to write in a different strain. This second line of development in biblical thought is the basis of the theology undergirding the season of Advent.

After the Exile, the thinkers of Israel gave up on history as a reliable source for the future of humanity. Advent represents the great theological movement that turns its face toward the future of God, not man. The early

part of Zechariah looks for historical vindication, but it does not come. After that, the whole Bible moves in the direction of the future: the coming Day of the Lord.

This is precisely why the Christian Bible is arranged differently from the Hebrew Bible. The books are exactly the same, but in the Christian Old Testament, the Wisdom literature comes in the middle and the prophets come at the end, looking ahead to the intervention of God from beyond and outside of history.

This shift is of great importance. Here we begin to hear the prophecies of a Messiah who will come “with the clouds of heaven” (Dan. 7:13–14). The very last words of the Old Testament point us ahead, not to scientific data about human possibility, but to the promises of God in the midst of human impossibility. When human hope and human potential have failed, the prophet tells us of cosmic happenings, with mountains moving and valleys filling up—“Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low” (Isa. 40:4, RSV).

In that final movement of God for the salvation of the world, “there shall be neither cold nor frost. And there shall be continuous day ... for at evening time there shall be light” (Zech. 14:6–7, RSV).

I love cemeteries where the gravestones have biblical verses on them. In one of the cemeteries where our family members were buried in the 19th century, there is a tombstone with the inscription, “At evening time there shall be light.” I used to think that line came from some sentimental Victorian poem. What a thunderclap to realize that it is from the apocalyptic passage in Zechariah, where the new creation from God comes into being! It’s not about the death of an elderly person slipping away into the twilight. It’s about the redemption of the entire human story and the created cosmos, transformed by the mighty intervention of God. Those redeemed by God “will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:5).

All of these majestic prophecies about the end of human history come into being in a way that would have been humanly inconceivable: the ordinary birth of an infant in the lowliest of conditions. He was received by most of the world with utter indifference, by some of the world with murderous rage (Herod), but by an infinitesimal few with awe that heaven has come to earth. God came to earth, not the other way around. *His* movement, *his* purpose, *his* promise fulfilled. God’s work, not ours. We could not and we cannot accomplish this with all our learning and all our achievements. Only God can do it.

The post-exilic writing of the Bible is always a threat to those who think well of human potential. Our default position since the day of Adam and Eve is to think that we can pull this project off by ourselves. Advent, however, begins in the dark, where human prospects and human hopes are confounded. As Isaiah writes, “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa. 9:2).

At this point the same question always arises: So what is there for us to do? If God is going to perform this rescue, what role is there for us to play? This is the perpetual complaint of human nature. Again, we want the credit. We push back perpetually at the idea of God’s grace being free, gratuitous, and complete in itself without reference to our contributions. If that is indeed the gospel that lies at the heart of the miracle of Christmas, what, then, should we be doing in the Advent darkness?

Here is a relevant story. Three years to the day after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris that killed 130 and wounded nearly 500, the city gathered for a somber memorial ceremony. Two American newspaper reporters collected testimonies from those who sought to process their rage and grief through the arts. The article focuses on one project in particular, a documentary film by two brothers named Jules and Gédéon Naudet, born in France, living in New York.

These brothers, as it happens, were filming in lower Manhattan on September 11 and were the only people to capture clear video footage of the first jet striking the North Tower. Their documentary about 9/11 is a classic, shown streaming in a museum in New York. Their more recent documentary is called “November 13: Attack on Paris.”

During an interview about the experience of making the Paris documentary, Jules Naudet said that they wanted to do a different film than the one about 9/11. The brothers explained that, instead of focusing on the bombing, the carnage, the horror, and the destruction, they sought out the survivors. This time, they said, they wanted to recreate the effects of the attacks “by being in the heads” of the people they interviewed.

They were surprised by what they found. In their words, you’ll see the connection to the Advent message and to our human response as we live in faith and in hope. Here is what Gédéon Naudet said:

None of the survivors talk about hatred, revenge, and killing. You have a choice: You go the dark way or you go the way with [the] light.

In Christ’s apocalyptic words recorded in Luke, we hear a similar invitation. Jesus speaks of the “distress of nations” and “fear and foreboding.” But in the midst of all this, we are invited to “look up and raise [our] heads, because [our] redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:25, 28, RSV).

That is the Advent message: In a world of profound darkness and distress, pervasive sin and evil, we look to the one true light—Christ Jesus, the Son of God.

Fleming Rutledge is an Episcopal priest and a best-selling author. This piece was adapted from a sermon preached during Advent at the Church of the Advent in Boston, Massachusetts.