

1 Advent C, November 28, 2021

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Good Omens

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

The demon Crowley in Neil Gaiman and the late Terry Pratchett's novel *Good Omens* was in favor of Armageddon in general, it was what he would have said he had been working for, but he had hoped it was a long way off. Because after being on earth for thousands of years, Crowley had grown fond of the humans he was supposed to be tempting. He admired our creativity and had started living like one. Humans had shown him to appreciate the beauty and delights of the world, how good we could be, how we can reflect our Creator, and he started to emulate us. Crowley also had a best friend, an angel named Aziraphale, who had been on earth as long as he had. They were meant to be enemies, but humans taught them the joy of friendship. When Crowley found out Armageddon had been put into motion by the forces of hell, he enlisted his friend Aziraphale to help him avert it, so they could save the world. The novel is a funny, sometimes irreverent, and often moving story of these two friends' efforts to stop something larger than themselves that had been put into motion. Even for an angel and a demon, there was a lot that was beyond their control. Yet by the end of the novel, not to give too much away, something did end, and something began, and the world was saved, because of something very good: love. Not the love of friendship. Not the love for place or things. The love of God. Which, we learn, was God's plan all along.

This novel is one of my favorites because of how it plays with concept of the end of days. As Neil Gaiman said in a promotion for the TV series the novel is based on, "Don't panic. It's only Armageddon, not the end of the world."

Every first Sunday in Advent, every first Sunday in the Church's new year, our scripture readings, especially the Gospel, are about what some call Armageddon, or the apocalypse, or the end of days, or the day when Christ will return. These scriptures have none of the comforts of a baby born in a manger, nor the familiarity of Jesus' healing miracles or feeding miracles, or parables that challenge social norms by including the outcast at God's table. The apocryphal parts of the Gospels have all the things we heard in today's Gospel: distress among nations, distress of the earth, people fainting from fear, and a sense of foreboding. The Gospel writers warn of a lot of things beyond our control that will cause fear. These Gospels also have advice that sounds a little bit like author Neil Gaiman, "Now when all these things take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

In all the apocryphal texts, we are given not only a warning, we are given the promise that Christ will return, and with his return things will be put to right. That means all those things that are bigger than we are, things some of us might try to change but cannot fix like poverty, injustice, racism, disease, even the pandemic, will be no more because Christ will complete bringing God's Kingdom to earth.

As followers of Jesus, we are told to long for that day, to wait for it, and to prefer such a world to the one we live in, where we see the ugliness of inequality and greed and sin. However, I wonder if many of us can relate to the demon Crowley and be all in favor of the return of Christ in general, but have become so comfortable with the way things are, especially if we have found a way for systems that exclude others to work in our favor, that we hope Christ's return is a long way off.

There is nothing wrong with loving the world, for there is a great deal of beauty in it. And there are times when we humans can reflect the love of our Creator and be very good. The return of Jesus will not ruin any of that. It is true that when Christ returns and puts things to rights it will be uncomfortable, it will be a big change, and any change – even ones we look forward to – can cause discomfort. For those who have benefited from the injustices and power structures of this world, the coming of Christ will feel like they are losing everything. Perhaps there are some people who feel that way now.

Perhaps the comfort we can find whenever Armageddon or signs of the end times come up in scriptures or in conversations (you know the ones that begin with someone who says, "the world is going to hell in a handbasket," is the comfort that is also in the scriptures that the One who is coming is not a stranger, it is Jesus. The same Jesus who died and rose again. The same Jesus who forgives, heals, and restores is who is coming. And while none of us can predict what such a time will be like, there is hope all the injustices will end and a new and better day will begin.

Perhaps the Church year begins with vivid images of pain and suffering of the world because that is part of the reality of life. I don't have to go into detail about the most recent tragedies to fill up our newsfeeds to remind us of that. Rather than responding to this reality with despair by reminding us no matter what good we might try to do there is still so much beyond our control, the readings of Advent give us hope by reminding us God kept God's promise through the Incarnation of Jesus and will keep God's promise again when Christ returns. So, when we get overwhelmed by the pain and suffering of the world, when we

feel all our efforts to make a better day are in vain, we can remember God already has something up God's sleeve, the love of God that may already be at work, will return in Christ. So we can preserve and keep trying our best to be faithful, look for signs like the good omens Jesus mentioned in the Gospel, and we can pray: Come, Lord Jesus, even so, quickly come.