

1 Advent C December 2, 2018
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No More Dystopia
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Kim Stanley Robinson has had it with dystopia. In a recent article the Hugo and Nebula award winning science fiction writer with a Ph.D. in English whose bestselling books have been translated into over 40 languages explained his frustration with the seemingly overabundance of books, young adult novels, short stories, movies and television series about imagined future places where people live lives that are dehumanized and fear-filled, otherwise called dystopia.

He wrote that the genre of dystopia has been with us for a very long time, and while some authors have tried to use it as a warning, dystopian stories are often just reflections on how people feel about current situations. By imagining a future that is much much worse than how things are now, dystopian works do little more than make folks feel a little better about the world we live in. Or they can become just another layer of cynicism that repeatedly tells us things are bad. Because this is something we already know, dystopia then, in Mr. Robinson's opinion is lazy storytelling that is unimaginative and self-indulgent justification for staying stuck in dissatisfaction.

For Kim Stanley Robinson, the genre of science fiction has a higher purpose than to cater to our fears where the only imagined way out of a dehumanized existence is some sort of revolution that fights fire with fire. That higher purpose is not to ignore what might be wrong, but to help all of us learn to imagine a new and better future, and to help us imagine how we might get to that better future. In that way, Science fiction can serve as a motivator of hope, to move us beyond waffling between pessimistic and optimistic outlooks to gaining a more mature attitude that says it really doesn't matter how an individual might feel about the possibility of a future that is better for all humankind and the earth and just do the work to get there.

Mr. Robinson reminded the readers of his article that it is actually possible for things to get better, but it won't just happen without involvement. It especially won't happen if we can't imagine a better day first. Which is why he was advocating that more science fiction writers need to step up and both imagine a better future for all people and imagine a way forward to that better place for the people and the planet.

It might surprise Kim Stanley Robinson to learn that the Church has not just one day, but a whole season dedicated to doing just what he believes science fiction can be when it is at its best: imagining a new and better future where all people are treated with dignity and respect, where equality is a reality, where people can do the work they feel called to do and contribute to society without the pressure of having a job that may or may not both pay the bills and fulfill a person's calling. Where we can all have plenty to eat, good places to live, and do so without causing harm to the other living things and essential ecosystems on this planet. The season the Church has for such imagining is the season we are beginning today on the very first day of the new Church year: the Season of Advent. I believe it is particularly beautiful that the Church begins its year by inviting us to imagine what a new and better world we call the Kingdom of God might look like and how we can live into it, in the midst of a reality that isn't there yet.

We can see such an invitation in the collect for the day that invites us to cast off works of darkness and put on armor of light. That's imaginative language that is also hopeful and certainly fits in with our Gospel reading from Luke that at first glance might sound like another work of dystopia with all of Jesus' talk of people fainting from fear and foreboding, and being on guard not to be weighed down by things like extreme overindulgence, or dissipation, drunkenness and the worries and anxieties of the world. In other words, all the stuff of hopelessness.

But if we were to only see that stuff in today's Gospel, we'd miss the part where Jesus said how we are to be: when people are afraid of things they didn't see coming or things they don't understand, we are not to cower, or avoid it by self-medicating, Jesus tells us to stand up, pay attention. Jesus may be saying that when people are afraid of losing things like power and prestige because other people considered minorities are gaining rights, and those who are gaining rights might feel afraid because of the responsibilities that go with those rights, that may feel like an ending, but it is also a beginning of a new and better day, a day so many people say they want. It just won't feel good to everyone. Being able to step back and pay attention is what will help not only understand what is going on, it is how we will see and recognize Jesus when he comes in the small ways that advance God's Kingdom, and when he comes at the last day. What scholars call the culmination of history, when God will bring to fulfillment this creation and a new heaven and a new earth will come to be.

Advent begins with the reminder that all we see and know will come to an end one day. And that isn't meant to be bad news, or fearful news, or a dystopian vision of the future. It is the first part of the invitation to imagine a new and better day. To anyone who knows what it is to be oppressed, or discriminated against, or victimized, or used, or put down because of things like their age or color or race or gender or economic status, this is good news because such people know first hand the brokenness of humanity and the injustice of our societies. To anyone who is hurting, who cannot find healing, who has not been forgiven or been able to forgive, who feels the ache of loneliness deeply, this is also good news because such people know too well the cost of sin and evil.

Because the good news is that when history ends, Jesus will come again. This is the at the very heart of our belief as followers of Jesus, and we say it every time we celebrate the Holy Eucharistic: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. And when Jesus comes again, he will put things to right.

Because Jesus rose from the dead, he already changed the world. And it was a world that needed changing. Part of what it means to follow Jesus is we can live differently because of that change. One thing we can do as followers of Jesus that is different from the rest of the world is to imagine that new and better day Jesus started when he rose from the dead and will bring to the whole world when he returns. And we can imagine such a reality not as a form of escape from our current reality, not as a way to feel better about our situation, but as a promise that such a reality is possible.

It is not a pie in the sky unrealistic optimism to imagine the reality of God's Kingdom. We already have everything we need to make it real: we already have enough food to feed all the people on the earth. The sun is still working, providing light and energy. And we have each other to share the work and care for each other. And while there may not be physical limitations, there are challenges, there are difficulties, and there are obstacles to overcome. Things like politics, and privilege, and discrimination, and fear. But that doesn't mean it can't be done. It can. It just won't be easy. It will take work. Hard work. It will require sacrifice, like all things that matter. But it can be done, with God's help.

And it starts with using a gift God has given us that we may not always utilize as thoroughly as we could: the gift of imagination. We don't have to imagine Jesus' return has a chaotic, fear-filled, fire and brimstone event. We could imagine something that looks more like the Jesus from the Gospels, which shows us God's love is not far away, but right here with us. A God that is both passionate and compassionate. Judge and Merciful at the same time. Life-giving and forgiving. A

God that will bring all things to right, which may not feel good if we think we are losing something. But maybe we could feel good when we see and recognize the person who has been persecuted or pushed down being raised up so that all people can stand together, side by side as fellow human beings, loved by God, loving God and loving each other.

Science fiction and philosophy writers call this utopia. We call this God's Kingdom. Cynics say it won't ever be. But it can. And it will. We don't have to know the date, because if we are paying attention, we will recognize it, as Jesus said in today's Gospel. Maybe it we will recognize it if we work at imagining that day and imaging how to get there, and by doing so find ourselves practicing the Kingdom of God and actually start seeing glimpses of it here and there. Maybe when Jesus' does return, God's Kingdom will look just like what we have been practicing. Or. Maybe it will be even better. For now, today, as we begin a new church year, we can start, we can imagine the possible God will make real through God's love.