

How many ways did our world turn upside down this year?

February we started to hear about this pandemic, and by March we were all staying in our homes, worrying about how much toilet paper we had, and transferring virtually every part of our lives online – our spiritual lives included. At the end of May the murder of George Floyd thrust the ugliness of American racism front and center – racism that has always been a cancer among us, yet more visible and less apologetic in recent years.

Many videos of unarmed Black men and women being killed by those charged with protecting life had been seen and generated outrage – but this eight-minute death witnessed by the whole world catapulted us out of our homes and onto the streets. Suddenly our nation was experiencing a level of social unrest that few of us had seen.

We had protests about whether or not to wear masks to keep each other safe. Meanwhile we were in a bitterly contested election campaign that proceeded in new ways, largely online. We voted in ways we had never done before – people voting early, people voting by mail, people waiting in long lines. And then we got to Election Day and had to wait four days or three weeks, depending on how you count, to have the outcome accepted. And now Covid numbers are rising again, contracting our holiday celebrations. Nothing in our world is as we have grown to expect it.

So... did the world turn upside down in 2020, or was it already upside down? Or did it turn upside down when Jesus came in flesh the first time? Everything he taught and demonstrated was upside down to what we consider “normal” human life.

He proposed a radical new way of loving and giving, of interacting with people, of confronting disease and despair and sin and death itself.

He showed a radical new way of dealing with authority, especially those who were corrupt and oppressive to people in need, poor, sick, out of the mainstream, on the margins. He said to love your enemies and the neighbor you might not even like.

He said to put your own prerogatives last. Jesus’ way of love is upside down! But if we listen, we can hear that tune sung throughout salvation history.

There are reversals all through our story – we hear them in the song of Hannah from the Old Testament, which we read today, and the Songs of Zechariah and Mary. We'll hear them in the Canticle of the Turning which we'll sing verse by verse throughout Advent. We hear it in the message of John the Baptist.

This is kind of the Advent message. In the Northern Hemisphere our readings and this emphasis track the natural shortening of days that we experience as we approach the winter solstice.

What is happening in the natural world is mirrored in our worship.

In Advent, we “go there” – we look at the darkness. We hear from Israel's prophets the gloom and doom about Israel's being overtaken by a series of foreign powers, about the fall of Jerusalem, destruction and exile.

In the gospel passage we read today, Jesus is channeling those prophets, talking about a worldly end, everything they count on being taken away. Every way they lived their lives was being upended. Sound familiar?

And then he talks about a cosmic cataclysm, with the total end of the world as we know it, the sun darkening, the moon weakening, the stars falling from the heavens. Some years ago, Christopher Nolan made a film called *Interstellar*, in which our world was coming to an end because the sun was darkened by clouds of dust from an earth that had grown completely arid and increasingly uninhabitable by humans due to climate change; people were literally choking on the dust. In that film, scientists in that film go into space and manage to manipulate the space-time-gravity continuum to bring a remedy.

Our great story goes the other way – not the humans going into the heavens, but the heavens coming our sphere, an earth in which humans were choking on sin and death, bringing a remedy we could never have come up with on our own.

As followers of the risen Christ we are tuned to the light that is on the horizon, a band of thin light getting wider. It is a light we help bring into being.

That light broke into this world in Jesus' first coming, some 2000 years ago in Bethlehem. That light will break into this world irrevocably at the end of the ages, when he comes again in power and great might.

And that light breaks into this world every time we invoke Jesus' name, his power, his love. Every time. We are called to rattle the powers of heaven.

We don't just look at the darkness and injustice – we invite the light into it. We invite Jesus, the light of the world in it.

The Advent promise is that Jesus will turn the world upside down when he returns, that everything will be brought into alignment and wholeness.

Maybe it was right side up when God first created it, and then humankind turned it upside down; and then Jesus showed what looked like an upside down world of God – but was really right side up.

And then, humans continue to try to turn it upside down again. The traumas and turmoil and topsy-turviness of 2020 reflect human choices, not God's desire. God invites us to help turn the world around again – and that means Living Ready.

How do we do that? How do we bear that light, bring that light?

How do we live ready to know Jesus, to receive Jesus into our lives?

That's what we're called to as Christ followers; not just to say "hey" on Sundays, but to say "Come in! Take up residence. I'm giving you real estate in my heart."

That might mean taking it away from other things or people.

How do we do we live upside down in order to help turn the world around?

For me that means staying physically healthy and fit, eating well, exercising so I have maximum energy to be God's person in this world.

It means financial health and generosity.

It means cultivating a relationship with Jesus through regular prayer, regular confession, so I'm aware of my "stuff."

It means cultivating a relationship of God's people, and knowing how to speak of where God has been in my life.

We ask that in Night Prayers a couple times a week, - where have you encountered God today? Sometimes we can't answer it easily; but other times it flows:

"there was a conversation, I didn't plan it, but it so blessed me and this other person."

Or "I met God on my walk today, or a bird I saw outside my window, or in the flow of work, or in an insight or an idea."

Being able to tell those stories is part of what it means to be ready, to live ready.

And living ready means holding lightly the things that we would clutch onto that are not God, to put our faith every day in the God we cannot see.

To expect blessing, even when we can't see where it could possibly come from in a given situation. So many times in the last six months I've had to consciously expect blessing when I was filled with foreboding, and blessing came.

The worst things did not happen. Maybe someday, but not today. Expect blessing.

So those are some of the ways that I seek to live ready.
What is one thing you might do this week to help you live spiritually ready?
I sent everyone a playlist yesterday – I will send one out each week of Advent.
A playlist is a set of curated resources around a particular theme.
Our Advent I playlist is ways to peruse, ponder, pray, practice and play
what it means to live ready for the Life of God.
In it you'll find scripture, poetry, music, links, prompts for things to ponder.
There are a couple of spiritual inventories – see where your growth edges are.
You'll find an invitation to take pictures this week of things that convey living ready
to you, and posting them on our social media pages with the hash tag
“Advent Christ Church La Plata” or Wayside.

There are ways for you to click on something to go deeper.
So maybe one choice you make this week is to look at the playlist,
and go into some of those. Send it to someone else.

What else? How will you live ready this week?
What fear or darkness will you turn away from this week?
Where will you bring light this week?
How will you rattle the powers this week?

*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*
That's God's Advent promise in an upside down world.

Amen.

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said, “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Isaiah 43:1-2,18-21

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches;

for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.