

**Advent 3**  
**12/12/2021**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20**  
**Psalm 23**  
**Luke 1:7-18**

### **On the apocalyptic Spirit**

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*In a sentence:*

*The Holy Spirit is given to renew us in the midst of a world which seems to be without God.*

With today's reading from Luke's Gospel, we find ourselves once again in the strange world of apocalyptic thought.

Foreign though it is, we don't have to try hard to find points of correspondence between that strange world and the estrangement in our own. The threat of climate change presses ever more closely upon us, as does the ongoing impact of COVID-19. In response to our chequered past, questions of restorative justice continue to threaten the future we presumed to be ours. Gender wars fill the papers, as do diplomatic tussles reflecting troubling shifts in international balances of power.

Just as the apocalyptic prophets of biblical times tell their hearers to look to the signs of the times, so also do we read the signs – the patterns in the weather, the number of cases each day, the latest mutation – all to understand where we are and what is coming next.

John's apocalyptic language, then, is perhaps less strange to us than might first seem. At least in the frightening aspects of the apocalyptic outlook, we see something of ourselves and our experience of our own times. Yet, what troubles we see on the horizon today are "merely" troubles. There is nothing in what is going on around us which could make sense of the conclusion of our passage today: "So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the *good news* to the people." Whatever our trials and tribulations, there is *good news* in the preaching of the apocalyptic prophet.

As we've noted before, the apocalypse is properly not the dramatic, attention-grabbing shaking of all things but the *revelation* of God which comes with it: the revelation of God's glory and the setting right of history. This is not a threat but rather something for which the people are longing. This is the "good news" – the gospel – in what John announces.

In the midst of all this, we hear in John's preaching something which almost passes without notice but which we will consider today: "I baptise you with water ... but one is coming who baptises with the Holy Spirit and fire". The difference between what John is doing as a prophet of the old era and what Jesus will do as a prophet of the new is that Jesus brings the Holy Spirit.

The coming of the Holy Spirit, then, is part of the apocalypse or revelation of God. And when it comes, what happens? Jesus "happens". The Spirit with which Jesus will baptise is the Spirit which comes upon him in his own baptism by John. Of course, Jesus has already "happened" at this point – he has been born and lived perhaps 30 years. Yet the connection between Jesus and the Spirit made explicit here (and in his birth – consider the descent of the Spirit on Mary in Luke's narrative account) is crucial

for what he is: the presence of God in the form of a piece of the world. In Jesus, God looks surprisingly like one of us.

This means that he has himself become the bearer of the apocalypse – the revelation of God – even as he is. What we see here is less a new age than a renewal of the age – a renewal of human possibility. This holds up even to the point of the crucifixion. What then happens by, around and to Jesus happens for him as the one on whom the Spirit rests.

Why does all this matter?

It matters because, for the things which trouble us today, resolution is only available to us tomorrow – that kind of tomorrow that never comes. Stark apocalyptic thought was also like this – now is the time of tribulation only; peace is coming tomorrow. God is presently – truly – absent, and we are on our own. God *is* coming, the enthusiast affirms, but right now we are truly alone.

But the New Testament baptises apocalyptic thought, soaking it in Jesus. To say that the Spirit-soaked Jesus baptises with that same Spirit is to say that God's coming is here and now. The Holy Spirit is the means and the extension of the apocalypse, of the revelation of God. By itself, the world is not a sign of God, and neither are the signs of the times. We might well try to read the signs of the time, but we do just as well to dismiss them. God is not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, not in the graphs or the predictions, not in warmer weather or diplomatic boycotts. Rather, God is in and among us by the Spirit who renews the face of the earth (Psalm 104).

This is why our liturgy for these few weeks of Advent has been laid out in the pattern of the church's liturgical year, making each successive season approximate to each element of the worship service. The service moves from the perceived absence of God lurking under Advent through to the proclaimed presence of God in the world in Pentecost, in the community of believers. At that Pentecostal point of the service – the Eucharist – we pray: send that Spirit which makes Jesus the Christ also upon us and what we will eat and drink, that *we* might be the presence of God, the Body of Christ. Let your will be done once more on earth as it was in Jesus. As that Body, we then pray for the world and are sent into the world.

And sent to do what? To bear fruit, as John cries out. As a tree takes mere elements and makes of them nourishing fruit, the renewed heart allows God to take what are mere elements – us – and make of them something life-giving. Jesus' own life is the taking of elements – the stuff of us – and making of them God's creative presence.

What does God's creative presence look like? It looks like a table spread in the darkest valley and all its signs of the end, our cup overflowing. We are called to take our seat at that table and to bring others to it – here and now, all the days of our lives given us to live. God comes not to wipe all things away as beyond redemption but to renew them. God comes not “spiritually” – spookily, in hidden places, hearts and minds. God comes not tomorrow or the day after but today.

The gospel proposes, first, that – by the Spirit Jesus receives – God looks surprisingly *like* Jesus – that heaven is made of earth.

The gospel proposes, second, that if we open ourselves up to the same Spirit Jesus gives, God will then look surprisingly like *us*: the Body of Christ, here and now.

The gospel proposes, third, that this is enough, whatever the signs of the times might be.

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