

Nowell, Nowell
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: November 27, 2016

00:00

“Nowell, Nowell” Pilgrim Church UCC, November 27, 2016, First Sunday of Advent (Matthew 24:36-44)

Advent has begun! This Liturgical Season centers on hopeful waiting for the birth of Jesus Christ into our midst. We take time to pause and prepare our hearts for Emmanuel—God with us. Though I must confess that this year I broke my own cardinal rule about early Christmas decorations. Christmas is my favorite holiday and November has been a difficult month nationally. And I just needed to see my little tree glowing brightly at the parsonage as the days get darker earlier, so it’s been up since November 11th and I don’t even feel bad about it!

This year we do need some hope. Of course we know that no matter how early the Christmas decorations go up in our homes or Santa appears at the Burlington Mall or we hear Christmas music on the radio—Advent is about waiting and ultimately trusting in the promises of God. Benedictine nun and worship scholar Joan Chittister explains: “The liturgical year does not begin at the heart of the Christian enterprise. It does not immediately plunge us into the chaos of the Crucifixion or the giddy confusion of the Resurrection. Instead the year opens with Advent, the season that teaches us to wait for what is beyond the obvious. It trains us to see what is beyond the apparent. Advent makes us look for God in all those places we have, until now, ignored.”[1]

Advent begins with apocalyptic texts from the Gospels, showing us a potential future of chaos and judgment and also imploring us to stay alert and be watchful, for we never know the day that Jesus will return. Matthew writes, “Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”[2] That whole text is just strange if we’re honest about it. But perhaps we can see these apocalyptic texts as that call to look for God in all those places we have until now ignored as Sister Joan Chittister says. We can see them as a call for hope—that justice will prevail and that God is a God of compassion and that without justice there can be no lasting peace. Therefore God is at work in our world in unexpected ways and justice matters to God. We need to keep awake! And when we see injustice, we better sound the alarm and get to work to make things right.

Let’s be clear that there are common ways to understand this Day of Judgment Matthew seems to be referring to—that day that no one knows about except God. This is helpfully outlined by John P. Burgess in one my favorite lectionary resource Feasting on the Word. Now some Christians believe that the Day of Judgment will be a literal event at a specific time in history. God’s elect will be raptured while the rest of humanity will be left behind to face God’s wrath. We need to be ready because these things may very well take place in our lifetimes. Another way Christians understand the Day of Judgment is that it won’t occur at the end of human history per say but at the time of every person’s death. Each of us will stand before God and need to account for our lives—the good and the bad. But again, we can’t put off doing what Jesus commanded us to do while he was among us. We won’t know for sure when we will die, so we better act like good disciples of Jesus Christ before it’s too late. The final way Christians usually understand this Day of Judgment is by seeing Jesus’ language as more symbolic. The point isn’t to speculate about a Day of Judgment sometime in the future (whether that’s in our human history or at the time of our own individual deaths.) Rather, we must consider the radical claims that God has on our lives every single day. In this understanding (which is more common among Progressive Christians), every day is like a day

of judgment where we should be asking ourselves: “Am I living in the way of Christ?” “Am I trusting in him alone?” “Have I allowed myself to be distracted by selfish cares?”[3]

Let’s not just throw out these apocalyptic Advent texts like we heard in Matthew 24 this morning because it’s a little strange. Instead maybe we can take to heart what Jesus is saying here and the deeper meaning. We must keep awake and focus on what really matters every day—loving God, loving our neighbors, loving ourselves. If we want to shine our lights in the world, hope is essential and we must be about the work of justice.

Sometimes it’s really hard to be grounded in that hope we ultimately find in God though. There’s a quote about being grounded that I love by author Iain Thomas who said, “And every day, the world will drag you by the hand, yelling, ‘This is important! And this is important! And this is important! You need to worry about this! And this! And this!’ And each day, it’s up to you to yank your hand back, put it on your heart and say, ‘No. This is what’s important.’” My friends, this holy season of slowing down and pausing and deep darkness before the light of Christ will shine fully in the world helps us put our hands on our hearts and say, “No. This is what’s important.”[4]

As we contemplate hope on this first Sunday of Advent (hope being something really important these days) the Christmas song “The First Nowell” can help us on our way.[5] Both France and England claim this song as part of their history and that’s why we sometimes see “nowell/noel” spelled differently. Some believe that the song migrated from England to France, who knows! Noel in either language means a joyful shout expressing exhilaration at the birth of Jesus. At its heart, “The First Nowell” is grounded in joy that Jesus Christ has been born among us.

Here’s what we know for sure—this song is a folk song. It wasn’t written by anyone famous, and it wasn’t written by anyone particularly educated. This folk song also isn’t scripturally accurate which was a common problem in Europe in the Middle Ages. Not everyone had a Bible in their homes. Literacy rates were low. Monasteries and churches had beautiful Bibles written in Latin, but your everyday person didn’t have a Bible to consult and probably couldn’t have read it even if they had one in their own language. “The First Nowell” erroneously says that the shepherds followed the star to the birthplace of Jesus. The Bible only mentions a star with the magi. And even then, the magi and the shepherds weren’t observing the birth of Jesus on the same night. We tend to get that part wrong on Christmas Eve because we often combine the birth story from Luke and from Matthew even though they are not the same. Luke has the shepherds in their fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. Matthew has the magi following the Christmas Star and that journey took a while.

But even if it weren’t for the Biblical inaccuracy, we know that “The First Nowell” is a folk song because of how the sentences are structured. Phrasing in the original song were sentences like “this child truly there born he was.” That’s just not the way someone who wrote hymns professionally would have written those lines. This song was probably conceived by someone with a lot of heart and enthusiasm and wonder at the birth of Jesus Christ. But this person didn’t have much Biblical knowledge and they were probably a common illiterate peasant. For these reasons and more, the clergy in the Middle Ages hated “The First Noel” and songs like it because they were biblically inaccurate peasant songs at the end of the day.

But the people, oh the people, loved folk songs like this. Because during the Middle Ages English peasants had adopted the Viking custom of the Yule Log and these folk songs enhanced that tradition. Every winter a family would hike out into the woods, cut down a huge tree, wrestle it back home, cut away all the branches, hollow out the inside, and fill up that space with oils and spices and set the log into the fireplace. Kindling was carefully placed around it and a woman of the family would light the fire with a splinter that had been saved from last year’s Yule Log. People believed that this was good luck and even adapted it a bit for

Christianity by burning the Yule Log on Christmas Eve and hoping that the log would last until Epiphany on January 6 when we celebrate the magi coming to see Jesus. The people were hoping that the log would burn and emit its wonderful fragrance for the entirety of the twelve days of Christmas. In England, “The First Noel” was sung by many peasants as they lit the Yule Log in their homes on Christmas Eve.

This folk song became the song that started the entire Christmas season. And that’s why I chose it as the song that would kick off our exploration of the stories behind Christmas hymns during Advent this year. “The First Nowell” is the song of the people, not the educated sometimes uppity clergy! For the first three hundred years of the song’s existence it was never sung as part of religious services. Instead, it was sung by families in their homes as they lit their Yule Logs—these folk songs became the Christmas voice of the people. And the church eventually relented. “The First Noel” began to be used by the Church of England in the mid-1800s and was even included in a book published by William Sandys in 1833. Sandys was a British lawyer who loved music and spent his spare time collecting French and English folk songs. All of these developments hundreds of years after English families first sang the song around the fire helped “The First Noel” become the famous Christmas song it remains today. While the tradition of the Yule Log may not be as observed as it once was, the hopeful message of “The First Noel” burns on in our hearts. “Noel, noel, noel, noel, born is the King of Israel.” Amen.

[1] Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*, 59.

[2] Matthew 24:40-42, NRSV.

[3] John P. Burgess, Theological Perspective of Matthew 24:36-44 in *Feasting on the Word: A Thematic Resource for Preaching and Worship, Advent Companion*, Eds. David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Kimberly Bracken Long, 39-41.

[4] Iain Thomas quote on [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com/quote/111111111).

[5] Ace Collins, “The First Noel,” *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*, 41-46.