



# Heaven *and* Earth

ADVENT *and the* INCARNATION

Will Willimon



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# CHAPTER 1

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## Meanwhile

*“In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won’t give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven....”*

*“But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. Watch out! Stay alert! You don’t know when the time is coming. It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know when the head of the household will come, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early*

*morning or at daybreak. Don't let him show up when you weren't expecting and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!"*

*(Mark 13:24-27, 32-37)*

Jesus—on the way out of the temple on that last visit—takes time to predict that in a short while the beloved, magnificent temple will be utterly destroyed (Mark 13:2). In Jesus's longest sermon in Mark's Gospel, Jesus rants that not one stone will be left on another. Imagine the shock among the faithful when they heard Jesus speak of the destruction of the building that was built to look eternal. The grand temple, meant to appear as if it had always been here and always would be, according to Jesus would very soon cease to exist.

More bad news. Jesus expands the apocalyptic (apocalypse = revelation), earth-shattering predictions beyond the temple:

*In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won't give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken.*

*(Mark 13:24-25)*

Advent begins with apocalyptic talk of the world's end. Our cherished religious institutions, beautiful creations, and time-honored traditions will “in those days,” in “that time” be dismantled, the whole cosmos shaken. Stars and planets, so reassuring in their constant courses, will be dislodged, turned upside down, deconstructed, all shook up.

My Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall.

(African American spiritual)

We claimed that we wanted Advent, said that we yearned for God to come to us. We prayed that God would descend from heaven to us.

But when God took us seriously and actually came down among us, God's Advent was so earthshaking that many ran for cover. Trouble is, we wanted God on our terms, not God's. We wanted God quietly and gently to slip in beside us, not kick in the door, blow the house down, tear up our temples, and shake us up.

The prophet Isaiah pled, during one of the many difficult days in Israel's history, "If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (Isaiah 64:1). But Jesus speaks of God's coming as an event that tears up not just heaven, but the whole world. Be careful what you pray for.

## SHAKEN

Most of us have been conditioned to think that church is personal. Just Jesus and me. So much of our praise music is packed with first-person pronouns. I. Me. My. Mine. Religion is a private matter, something just between the two of us. Church is where we go, if we go, to have some personal time with a God who sometimes gives us assistance with our individual problems.

"What does that have to do with me?" is the question that's put to every sermon. "What's in it for me?"

Therefore it's a jolt to be told, on the First Sunday of Advent, that when God at last turns toward us, God is about more than mere healing, moral renovation, or a helpful spiritual nudge for

individuals. God's intentions are no less than cosmic: heaven and earth shaken, darkened sun and moon and stars falling from the sky.

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Powerful, privileged people (like most of us North American mainline Christians) get nervous when the talk turns edgy apocalyptic. Such highly charged, poetic language sounds unsophisticated, primitive, even fundamentalist. What would my sophisticated friends, who already think this church stuff is whacko, think of me if they heard Jesus on the world's end? And after all, down through the ages, those Christians who took Jesus's predictions literally, thinking that they had come up with a date for the end of the world, have always been wrong. Right?

Don't flatter yourself that you are put off by Jesus's apocalyptic predictions because you are so sophisticated, modern, and urbane. People on top, well-fed and happily ensconced, tend always to

believe that this world is as good as it gets. Don't pray for change; work the world as it is to your advantage and privilege. Church is where we come to nail things down. The Christian faith is a primitive technique for holding on to what you've got. Stop whining about your troubles in the present; cease dreaming about the future. Adjust. This is as good as it gets. The best of times. Learn to be happy with things as they are. Steady, upward progress is easier on the psyche than abrupt death of the old and birth of the new.

So the church plods along as always, for two thousand years brushing off Jesus's talk of the sky falling and the sun being extinguished, reassuring ourselves. Relax. Jesus doesn't know what he's talking about. Didn't happen then and won't happen now.

Jesus, keep your disruptive, earthshaking apocalyptic visions to yourself.

Then came COVID-19, the nightmarish body counts on the nightly news, impotent old men refusing to vacate high places, trouble in the streets, broken glass, conspiracy theories, revolutionary rumblings among the young, dire predictions by Fox News, fear on the right and the left. Get yourself a gun. Cower behind locked doors. The penny dropped. Jesus's apocalyptic prophecies about the end began to make sense.

When things are going well for me personally—my children are well fed and my days are reasonably sunny; I'm secure in my gated community, clutching my 401(k) to my heart, eating organic, and working out at the gym now and then—I'm not too concerned about others whose needs are greater than mine.



I take out an insurance policy, purchase an alarm system, and hold on to what I've got even more tightly. It's disconcerting to have Jesus say to us, as Advent begins, that this world (that we've worked reasonably well to our advantage) is terminal. It's scary to hear Jesus announce that we are profoundly unsafe.

Texts like Mark 13 explain why most of our churches bolt the pews to the floor, the furnishings are heavier than they need to be, and the building is made to look five hundred years older than it really is. This is church twisted into a means of keeping our world safe from the cosmic shakings of Jesus. Plodding through the order of worship, seated row upon row in our fixed-in-place pews, singing familiar hymns in unison without missing a beat, huddled with folks like us, beginning and ending right on time, secures us from the possibility of a God who just can't leave us be.

“Lord, we didn't mean what we said when we asked you to come down and save us. Just give us some helpful guidance whereby we might be improved rather than saved. Better still, why don't you just leave well enough alone?”

Advent scripture says that our stratagems for being left alone won't work because of who God is and what God is up to.

First, God is relentless—fecund Creator who didn't just begin the world and then retire. God keeps working with the world, bringing something out of nothing, light out of darkness, and form out of chaos, birthing a new you out of the old. There are many millennia of our well-documented human screwups, and still God's not done with us yet.

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Second, God is love. Love's not love that abandons the beloved. There's much that we don't know about God, but this we know for sure from reading nearly any verse of scripture: God is determined to find a way to love us, to converse with us, to fulfill God's promises to us, even if God's got to rock our world in order to get the love that God wants.

Should the true and living God be turning toward us, there are bound to be jolts and bumps, some shaking along the way. Something must die in order for anything to be born. The first name for Christians was the Way (Acts 9; 19; 22)—people on the way toward God, or God making a way toward us, take it either way. We're not where God wants us to be, not by a long shot. "We don't have a permanent city here, but rather we are looking for the city that is still to come" (Hebrews 13:14). If we're going to follow Jesus, we must learn to sit lightly on present arrangements.

Standing on the sidewalk before a storefront ministry for and with the homeless that she had managed for two decades, I asked the manager, "How have you been able to keep at such demanding ministry for so long?"

She waved her hand over the gray ruin that was that part of the city and said, “Scripture keeps reminding me that all of this is temporary. God refuses to let what we’ve made of this town be eternal. Bad news for the guys who own those buildings and run the city; good news for folks who sleep on the streets.”

What can we expect of God? A homeowner sleeps, secure in his stuff (Matthew 24:43, read the First Sunday of Advent, Year A). During the night, the proprietor awakes. A thief has kicked in his door, invaded his cozy alliance with the status quo, broken in and ripped off everything. Jesus warns us to live as if all we think is ours, safe and sound, is about to be ripped off. Losers, watch out, wake up!

God the Thief, the Great Rip Off, not the most flattering divine image, to be sure. Good news or bad? Much depends on how tightly you’re holding on to your stuff when you receive the news.

Jesus apocalyptically strides out of the temple and into the world, letting the disciples in on an open secret: *God is launching a great invasion to take back what belongs to God.* A new world breaking into the old. A whole lot of shakin’ going on.

Spoiler alert: A few days after this announcement of the end of the temple in Mark 13, Jesus shook even the tight grip of death. In Jesus’s cross and resurrection, Jesus didn’t just come back from the dead, he also turned time on its head. Which is probably why Matthew (27:51-52) says that when Jesus on the cross breathed his last breath, rocks split, the earth heaved, and tombs were broken open. Three days later, when Jesus walked forth from the tomb, the earth violently shook and the

stone rolled away. Jesus, in his death and in his resurrection, an earthquake.

Or, as Paul said, trying his best to explain the Resurrection to thickheaded King Agrippa (Acts 26:26), “This didn’t happen secretly or in some out-of-the-way place.” This thing—the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus—is cosmic, world-shaking, time-disrupting. God won’t be tucked away in your heart, or confined to an hour at church on Sunday morning, or limited to matters personal and private. God thinks God owns it all and God is going to get back what belongs to God.

Apocalyptic Jesus refuses to allow God to be used as the cement of social conformity or to have the gospel trimmed down to common sense. Buttoned-down, mainline Christianity has always been nervous about Jesus’s apocalyptic talk. Those of us who have successfully scrambled our way to the top find the gospel easier to manage when it’s toned down to soothe the anxious consciences of those of us who benefit from things as they are. But to people on the bottom or at the margins, all who are paralyzed and hopeless from fear, oppressed by the system, trapped in inescapable prisons, Jesus’s apocalyptic is good news. Help is on the way. God is taking time for us.

Apocalyptic is good news because it’s not simply about ending; it’s also beginning. Jesus speaks of dismantling and deconstruction to alert us to the birth of something new. God’s creativity doesn’t end at Genesis; dismantling and disruption presage New Creation.

The psalmist sings,

*God is our refuge and strength,  
a help always near in times of great trouble.  
That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls  
apart,  
when the mountains crumble into the center of  
the sea,  
when its waters roar and rage,  
when the mountains shake because of its surging  
waves....*

*Come, see the LORD's deeds,  
what devastation he has imposed on the earth—  
bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world,  
breaking the bow and shattering the spear,  
burning chariots with fire.*

*(Psalm 46:1-3, 8-9)*

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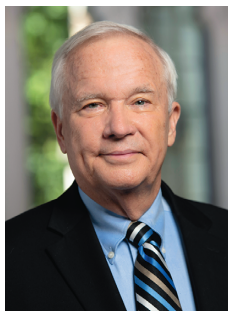
**“Times of great trouble” can be,  
in God’s hand, seasons of  
deliverance, though there may be  
some “devastation” and “shattering”  
in the meanwhile. Bad news for  
those who’ve trusted in the bow,  
spear, and chariot; good news for  
those who’ve got no refuge and  
strength except God.**

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# Watch out. God is on the way.

It's not within our own power to make a fresh start. If we're to have a future different from the past, it must come as a gift, something not of our devising. What we need is a God who refuses to be trapped in eternity, a God who not only cares about us but is willing to show up among us and do something with us, here, now.

In *Heaven and Earth: Advent and the Incarnation*, Will Willimon introduces you to the God who does just that, bringing heaven to earth and changing everything. In Advent, we celebrate and anticipate the earth-shaking, life-transforming good news that God is coming to us. Watch out. Get ready. God is on the way.



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