Dark Days

November 30, 2009 (First Sunday of Advent)

I want to tell you a story about the Dark Day of New England. No, not last year's Superbowl, but the 19th of May, 1780.

A combination of foggy weather, thick clouds, and smoke from slash-and-burn deforestation fires that had run out of control, plunged the East Coast into deep, unexpected darkness from Portland Maine to Trenton, New Jersey.

In Hartford, Connecticut, day rapidly turned to night. The legislative council was plunged into panic – surely *this* must be the apocalypse of Holy Scripture!

Unsurprisingly, there was a motion to adjourn; at which, Col. Abraham Davenport stood up and declared: "I am against the adjournment. Either the day of judgment is at hand or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I wish to be found in the line of my duty."

Then he ordered candles to be brought in, and they went back to their legislative business – an act to regulate the shad and alewife fisheries of Connecticut! Truly the classic, practical Yankee soul. In a popular poem about the incident, Davenport is said to declare "Let God do his work; we'll see to ours."

But Col. Davenport was being more than practical. A Congregationalist deacon, Davenport was practicing a justice-oriented theology about Christ's second Advent, the full enstatement of God's reign. He is paying attention to the justice of the *eschaton* – that is, the end of this age and the coming of the next, rather than the destructive images of the *apocalypse*.

It can be entertaining, getting caught up in the details of the Apocalypse spiritual rubbernecking, ooing and aahing over the fire and blood of Revelation; whether it's the "Left Behind" series of books, movies, and video games, or movies like *2012* which throw *both* science and religion on the window in pursuit of apocalyptic disaster.

There is something in our minds, deep in the primitive cerebral cortex, that is fascinated with disaster and doom. You can hear it in Luke's breathless language. You can hear it in the title of the book that talks about Davenport: Historic Storms of New England: Its Gales, Hurricanes, Tornadoes, Showers With Thunder And Lightning, Great Snow Storms, Rains, Freshets, Floods, Droughts, Cold Winters, Hot Summers, Avalanches, Earthquakes, Dark Days, Comets, Aurora Borealis, Phenomena In The Heavens, Wrecks Along The Coast, With Incidents And Anecdotes Amusing And Pathetic, by Sidney Perley (1891)

Like so many of the pleasures of the cerebral cortext, a bloody fascination with the *apocoplypse*, the destruction of this world, is a short term reward with no view of the long term.

Walter Wink writes compares the Apoclyptic to the Eschatalogical:

> *In an apocalyptic moment, as it is generally conceived, the future seems to be closed, inevitable and inescapable. Since the future can't be averted, apocalyptic can only call people to personal repentance, so that after the catastrophe they might survive to enjoy heaven or a transfigured earth.*

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> *Eschatology, by contrast, regards the future as open, undetermined and capable of being changed if people alter their behavior in time. The urgency of the great prophets of the Old Testament came from their conviction that catastrophe need not happen, that even a small deviation from the course toward doom might avert it.*
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> *Eschatology is concerned about the goal of humanity and the world; apocalyptic is consumed with the actual end of the planet earth as it is presently constituted. Prophetic eschatology is ruthlessly realistic, yet incurably hopeful. Apocalyptic has abandoned hope, and looks for divine, miraculous intervention.*[1]

Today is the first day of the new year – the first Sunday of Advent is when the church year begins. It is the dawn of something new. Advent is a time of waiting and hope, a time to explore and practice Christian eschatology. For these four weeks of Advent we will hear stories of the coming of the Second Advent, the return of Christ in all his glory, to establish that holy reign of justice and mercy that we pray for every time we say "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

The scriptures do not call us to sit by passively, weight down by dissipation and the worries of this life, or waiting with glee for the destruction of others. We are called by scripture, by our faith, by our baptism, to engage in the holy work of bringing about the kingdom
by bringing about the mercy and justice of God – to love our neighbors as ourselves, to love God with our whole heart. To feed the hungry and shelter the homeless, to love our enemies, to welcome the outcast, and give rest to the weary.

Eschatology is not an act of fear, nor of bloodlust. It is an act of love. It is an act of imagination: What does God's kingdom look like to you?

What does God's kingdom look like to you? Are the hungry fed? How do people live? Are the rivers and oceans clean, or filthy? Do people live with joy and hope, or in fear and destitution? Who is welcomed around the altar table?

And having begun to imagine God's kingdom, what does God call you to do to prepare the way, to help establish God's reign?

Either the day of judgment is at hand or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I wish to be found in the line of my duty.

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[1] Walter Wink, "Apocalypse Now?" The Christian Century, October 17, 2001, pp. 16-19.