

**Isaiah 2:1-5**

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come  
the mountain of the Lord's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.  
Many peoples shall come and say,  
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.'  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,  
and their spears into pruning-hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the Lord!

**Matthew 24:36-44**

Jesus said to the disciples, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 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. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

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It's in the nature of perception, of how we see, or if we don't have sight, grasp our environment. that our brains fill in - what eyes alone might not clearly see.

That in itself is a wonder, a marvel.  
When something new and different comes on the horizon...

our minds rummage with imperceptible speed in our library of experience, to compare it with.

Especially on the periphery, the margins of our vision.

More often than not, we get it right, and can make our way through the environment we inhabit.

That's why you've lived as long as you have.

Because in the most immediate exercise of all our senses, we live to the extent that we recycle and repurpose.

When a bell rings,  
we sit up and take notice.

Only what is entirely unprecedented - or what we have found ways of ignoring - will catch us by surprise.  
And sweep us away.

And Advent's gift is precedent.

Even if we've recast this season as a mere countdown to a festival consumed by consumption;

Maybe despite that, we might even manage to celebrate Christmas, too !

The birth of a child outside convention, soon to be a refugee, with a message we take to our joy, or leave, to the world's peril.

I've mentioned before the prophetic miracle of Jonah - that a city hell-bent on destruction, yet hearkening to a prophetic voice, evaded disaster .

And in the book of Jonah, not just for comic effect, it's not just the people,....

but their animals too, who join in the change that makes the difference.

Prophecy is most often the gift of warnings.

But the fulfilment of prophecy is both when things do and do not turn out as the warnings suggest....

The criterion is: it has had an effect. Prophecy is not single-use.

Prophecy differs from inexorable destiny. Prophecy says 'you have been warned'.

But is vindicated both in disaster and in the avoidance of disaster.

Key interpreters, right now, of the prophetic voice of the Earth, are not only the thousands of scientists...

whose work opens up the state of the planet, the signs of the times,.....

but also the millions of our sisters and brothers, both in Christ and otherwise, who are starved, made homeless, and struggle.

In Pakistan, all life including human life has experienced that this year.

But it need not have been so.

In the Pacific, too, where sea-water floods into land where food was grown. We're well past the refuge of reasonable doubt.

Please do not insult yourselves - or your churches or those who have already lost everything - with ill-informed modes of denial and evasion.

Or the shuffling of our response to emergency into a cheap-and-harmless agenda.

Behind buildings and organs and God knows what.

Because - unlike those victims of the flood- what you know is not nothing. And to change direction is to claim a better life.

What do you need to leave behind? What can you be yourself... what can you be the church without?

Or don't we do fasting in Advent any more?

I wonder how it was for that first poet who took up the challenge of writings we know as the Book of Isaiah.

Whether they themselves were already looking back to cherished stories, or appealing to immediate and decisive experience...

to The way it seems, alongside the way the measuring devices might insist.

to The dreams, rather than just the facts.

It was a dream that finally changed my own mind on nuclear weapons, when I was first finding faith.

If you climb mountains, it's seldom just the height, but rather what we call the prominence that makes the difference between a gentle scramble and a demanding climb.

The extent to which a summit stands out. The highest mountain may not be the most significant. And in Jesus' teaching, as well as, for instance, in the Psalms,....

as well as very much in the growing heat of global warming, it's the experience of prominence that comes to the fore.

Even if, in our northern hemisphere, the nights have drawn in. The landscape is changed.

From a different location, even the hills look different. What we thought was highest no longer dominates.

But then again, at this time of year, when other creatures rest or hibernate, we defiantly squeeze our senses into a working day which looks like night.....which ignores the authority of the lights who rule the night and day.

Bible cities have watchmen. The one who see first both the danger and the joy. Alertness, whether to joy or disaster is part of God's gifting to our species and also to many others. As well as the chief gift of Advent. Wake up!

Predators like us should also know how the alarm of one prey species can save the lives of another. . When I visited American Samoa....

they told me how the animals and birds abruptly and scarily disappeared in advance of the devastating tsunami in 2009.

In the global north, and wherever our cultural empire takes hold, Humanity could be said to have exchanged our senses for technology.

It's part of how we have become divorced and alienated from the family of life of Earth.

Sometimes the devices give us even better warnings, especially long-term forecasts, but having detached our safety from our own bodies, do we then still act, as do fellow creatures, when danger is clearly ahead?

How can the already dangerous compromise limit of a mere 1.5 degrees of global warming, which we'll likely pass whilst I'm still in this job, sound as wutheringly alarming as Storm Arwen in advent last year?

Do we need to express the footprint for the flights taken to church meetings in dead puffins, or will kilos of carbon suffice?

Like churches that sub-contract their engagement with community; whenever we've handed over defining aspects of humanity, we risk becoming less human.

In a conversation with colleagues, one said that to be human was to be in the image and likeness of God.

Fair enough. But beware that in saying this - because the Bible certainly does not exclude it - that we do not proclaim that the image and likeness of God expressed viscerally in human bodies and pre-eminently in Christ cannot include everything else we share with fellow creatures.

With the Earth of which God made us. There's much to be said for a holy mystery which remains mystery, rather than pruning the possibilities which experience opens up.

Given that Jesus brings up the story of Noah and the Ark, should we be encouraged piously to value a sense that the decisive actions of  
of even a few -.....

rather than all - of our own species must also bear responsibility of care for fellow creatures in the face of disaster.

Your small green action, your small quiet prayer brings healing and peace. Or at least lessens hurt and conflict.

Our small response, when we even grasp a hint of the sickness of the planet, might be part of God's care for life as a whole.

We do live, currently with very near certainty of sea-level rise, as well as brutally abrupt acceleration of the events we could just about cope with when they happened once in ten years or a century,....

but for which life on Earth is scarcely better prepared than were the dinosaur for that asteroid 65 million years ago.

Life does adapt, finding new place and purpose, and given the chance, healing of landscapes and ecosystems can surprise, but we cannot take such grace for granted. God help us!  
And God does.

The New Testament's preoccupation with prophecy and especially Jesus' own constant recontextualisation of his spiritual heritage operates in a similar way.

Reaching creatively for the spiritual resources of those stories and experiences of God's people which look, sound and smell sufficiently like what we're going through, to shed light on the direction we might choose.

Here. Now. Today and tomorrow. Because yesterday is out of our hands.

This is why reflecting on the defining festivals of the Christian year is absolutely appropriate for people of faith becoming aware- as one of our Advent calendar contributors has put it - of what it means to witness the beginnings of a Great Extinction.

An emergency without precedent, so that what might in my lifetime have been thought of as quaintly exaggerated sayings and stories - even in the mouth of Jesus himself - now take on the character of our news reports.

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away....

The Warning Word of God, however grim, is Good News, even the best news. If it reconnects the instincts for emergency which are ours, with the not-exclusively-human gifts of rational and creative response. Advent is a call to that sort of wholeness.

We have the choice to re-embody those “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage”, to become the sad legends that surviving humanity may yet recycle as a warning,

But, the stories of those directly involved in the birth of Christ highlight the significance of listening and acting, even to dreams and to signs in the skies, which the naked eye might barely hint at.

Apart from the alarming intervention of the hottest day ever recorded in the UK, which turned our green hills yellow so still conspires to get in the way.....

Prophecy-proof Business as usual rules out signs both of danger or of joy, emerges therefore both as dangerous, and tragic in terms of missed opportunities.

It isn't lack of information. This season is about how to pick it up and turn it into the sort of stories that change lives, rather than sitting back and letting them be lost.