

*Blessing When The World is Ending*

Look, the world  
is always ending  
somewhere.

Somewhere  
the sun has come  
crashing down.

Somewhere  
it has gone  
completely dark.

Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the gun  
the knife  
the fist.

Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the slammed door  
the shattered hope.

Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the utter quiet  
that follows the news  
from the phone  
the television  
the hospital room.

Somewhere  
it has ended  
with a tenderness  
that will break  
your heart.

But, listen,  
this blessing means  
to be anything  
but morose.  
It has not come  
to cause despair.

It is simply here  
because there is nothing  
a blessing  
is better suited for  
than an ending,  
nothing that cries out more  
for a blessing  
than when a world  
is falling apart.

This blessing  
will not fix you  
will not mend you  
will not give you  
false comfort;  
it will not talk to you  
about one door opening  
when another one closes.

It will simply  
sit itself beside you  
among the shards  
and gently turn your face  
toward the direction  
from which the light  
will come,  
gathering itself  
about you  
as the world begins  
again.

– Jan Richardson

## **Waiting on Hope**

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The first Sunday of Advent,  
the four-week period of expectant waiting before Christmas  
in the Christian tradition,  
always begins with the apocalyptic visions.

Last week was the first Sunday of Advent,  
and the reading came from the book of Luke.  
It reads in part: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,  
and on the earth distress among nations  
confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.  
People will faint from fear and foreboding  
of what is coming upon the world,  
for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

It's an odd choice, that the supposedly most joyful season—  
"Gloria!" We sing. "Rejoice!"  
"Joyful, joyful, we adore thee."  
Should begin with the end of the world.

"Look—  
the world is always ending  
somewhere",  
Jan Richardson writes in our reading.  
"Somewhere the sun has come crashing down,  
somewhere it has gone completely dark.  
Somewhere it has ended with  
the gun,  
the knife,  
the fist."

I have been obsessed with our reading this week  
because I needed it so badly.  
I keep reading it over and over and over to myself.

This reading found me on Facebook,  
where a whole lot of bad news also finds me, and regularly.  
Shootings in San Bernadino, California,  
At the Planned Parenthood in Colorado Springs,  
overwhelming numbers of Syrian refugees in desperate need,  
the violence of ISIS,  
the climate summit in Paris,

Laquan McDonald dead in Chicago,  
Jamar Clark dead in Minneapolis,  
Black Lives Matter 4<sup>th</sup> Precinct Shutdown shot at by white supremacists.  
Sometimes it's all too much.  
The world is always ending somewhere.  
Somewhere the sun has come crashing down,  
somewhere it has gone completely dark.

And so, in the middle of a news story about another  
downed plane,  
another ship of refugees,  
another fire,  
another round of gun violence,  
I impulsively jab the buttons on my car radio,  
switching from listening to NPR to listening to Kiss 108  
and I try to pretend,  
for just a few minutes,  
that I *did not* major in Women & Gender Studies in college  
and that I can't hear *any* of the problematic sexist messages  
in the pop music coming through my car stereo and I rock out  
at the top of my lungs,  
and then, without complaint or comment or even internal resistance,  
I make a Christmas list  
at my Mom's request that has just regular old stuff on it  
even though I think we all consume way too much as a society  
and even though I think it's killing the earth  
because I want to lose myself sometimes  
in the noise and the shiny lights and the distractions  
because sometimes it is  
All. Too. Much.

"This blessing  
will not fix you  
will not mend you  
will not give you  
false comfort;  
it will not talk to you  
about one door opening  
when another one closes.  
It will simply  
sit itself beside you  
among the shards  
and gently turn your face  
toward the direction  
from which the light  
will come,

gathering itself  
about you  
as the world begins  
again.”

Advent starts each year with violence and chaos  
to remind us that this was the world that Jesus was born in to.  
That those ancient words about distress among nations  
being confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves  
and people fainting from fear and foreboding of what the world is coming to:  
that ancient world isn't so very far away from us.  
It starts with the violence and the chaos  
to remind us that the Christmas story isn't a rosy story  
about a middle class family having a planned pregnancy  
in a place where they think it's a good, safe place for a kid to grow up.  
No, when Mary is told by the archangel Gabriel that she is pregnant,  
waiting for Jesus' birth,  
she is young, defiant, unwed,  
about to leave her homeland because of the political circumstances  
of the time.  
And yet she says “let it be”,  
she sings God's praises,  
and she proudly declares that generations will call her blessed.

In the Christian tradition, Christmas is celebrated  
as the birth of the savior of the world.  
That's why the holiday has significance.  
And Advent is the time of waiting on the birth of that savior, that salvation.  
But salvation doesn't come out of a perfect world.  
It comes out of a world that *needs* salvation.  
A world that needs rebirth.

And we all need salvation.

Because, after all, I like etymology just as much as Nathan does,  
and “salvation” means “healing”.

And so, regardless of whether we believe Jesus brings salvation  
or whether we believe that salvation is ongoing  
or whether we believe that salvation is yet to come,  
or perhaps a little bit of all three,  
we all are waiting on some sort of salvation, some sort of healing.

We are waiting  
On a new job offer  
For the right time to leave

For more time to spend together  
To see if she stays sober  
To hear about his diagnosis  
To know if the treatment worked  
To see what our children grow up to become  
To hear if we made any impact at all  
To hear “I love you”  
To hear “I’m sorry”  
To hear them say “thank you”  
We are waiting  
For the verdict to come down  
For an end to gun violence  
For an end to young men of color being crucified by the state  
For your heart to be stitched back together after losing her  
For the painful memories to fade  
To see whether the holidays will be as hard again this year  
For the depression to lift  
For the right time to say something important  
For the time when you know, for sure, you made the right decision

We are all waiting on something.

I wonder what Mary was waiting on,  
as she waited for that night in the manger?  
I wonder if she knew how her son’s life would end,  
as she was waiting for it to begin?

I, for one, I’m waiting on nothing less than the rebirth of the world—  
a world of liberation and justice and joy and enough for all.  
And I don’t always feel like I know how to live in this world  
while I’m waiting on a world that isn’t here yet,  
and I don’t know when it will be.

I wonder, too, how we can live as we are waiting on healing, on salvation,  
not knowing what our future or our children’s’ futures will hold?  
How can we live with hope and joy  
And yet not close our eyes to the heartbreak of the world?

My colleague Cecelia Kingman writes,  
“it’s precisely this heartbreak into which the gospel news enters.  
This moment, the scandal of Christmas is what I’m clinging to—  
the scandal of a low-born, brown person who stood up and sang truth,  
and invited others to do the same,  
a peasant laborer who taught resistance to the domination system,  
even unto death.  
I can’t live in this world as it is.

But I am not *supposed* to live in this world as it is—none of us are.  
Do not be reconciled to domination.  
Do not give up.  
Grab hands with someone else and hold on tight.  
All we have is one another  
and our unwillingness to reconcile ourselves to these horrors."

For Advent has another message,  
and beautiful candles and time to contemplate,  
because don't forget that these candles of advent  
are candles of hope, peace, joy, and love.

Hope, peace, joy, and love.  
The message of advent is that we can live with all of these  
as we are waiting, as we live with also the heartbreak of the world.

We must live in between these two truths—  
that the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, the world reborn—  
is the already and the not yet.  
That the world is always ending somewhere,  
and yet, there is always the possibility of joy, love, peace, and hope,  
here and now,  
and that these two truths need not be in conflict with each other.

In my office I have a piece of art that I made as a final for one of my classes,  
and on it I glued a bunch of quotes from theologian Rebecca Parker  
—you can come see it sometime if you are interested—  
but there is one line that I put in the center that catches my eye  
every time I walk by.  
It says "Paradise is not a place free from suffering or conflict,  
but it is a place in which Spirit is present and love is possible."

I need that reminder often.  
Paradise is not a place free from suffering or conflict,  
but a place where *Spirit is present and love is possible*.  
This Advent season I am searching for that Spirit—  
looking to find the love, hope, joy, and peace  
in the world that is  
while we wait on and co-create the world that is yet to be.

So this Advent season, while I wait for the world to turn  
I am also experiencing hope.  
I am accepting a precious gift from my five year old cousin, who says  
He doesn't need two special coins, just one  
And he wants me to have the other one.  
I am listening to a district judge risk saying the unpopular,

talking about the need for fair trials and fair sentencing.  
I am walking into the bathroom of the music venue  
I've been to dozens of times before  
Now both labeled "all genders".  
I am returning to my car, 10 minutes after my meter expired,  
to find that the meter still mysteriously has five minutes left on it.  
Hope finds me.

As I wait for the world to turn, I am experiencing Peace.  
I am sharing a quiet moment on the couch with my partner.  
I am holding a sleepy baby as she fights sleep and finally surrenders,  
curling in to my body to rest.  
I am standing in this sanctuary in the middle of the week  
when no one else is here.  
I am sitting around a campfire in December, sipping hot chocolate,  
looking up at the clear winter sky.  
Peace finds me.

As I wait for the world to turn, I am experiencing Joy.  
I am flipping through the air, doing a front hand spring  
that I've been working on for months,  
landing on my feet for just a split second before I fall again.  
I am playing a silly party poetry game with friends  
who are laughing until they cry.  
I am holding my friends' three-month old daughter, that same sleepy baby,  
who has *just* learned to laugh,  
and I am lifting her over my head as she grins with delight.  
I am singing with my sister at an Indigo Girls concert,  
a concert hall of hundreds belting out the well-loved lyrics as one body.  
Joy finds me.

And as I wait for the world to turn, I am experiencing Love.  
I am teaching this same five-year-old cousin  
the secret delights of our grandmother's Toll House Cookie Pie,  
and watching his face light up as he tries it for the first time.  
I am singing happy birthday to my partner, surrounded by our friends.  
I am hugging my sister, who just got a job after years of searching,  
after her first full and long week at work.  
Love finds me.

And as I start to make this list for this sermon  
of ways I've found hope, and joy, and peace, and love this Advent season  
I am composing this list in my head as I go through my day,  
and I notice a person quietly singing along to that same pop music at the gym,  
and see them gently signing it to themselves in sign language.  
And I notice the sports team, arms open wide,

as they wait for their last player  
To come and close the circle before they cheer.  
And I notice the kid being swung between her parents hands  
as they all walk along the street,  
and I notice the people in the coffee shop helping one another with their schoolwork  
and I notice the warm December sun on my face.

And I notice, slowly, slowly, my awareness start to shift, and I think:  
maybe the world isn't going to hell in a handbasket,  
or at least maybe not quite as quickly as I think it is sometimes.  
The world is always ending somewhere,  
and yet somewhere hope and peace and joy and love  
are also always being reborn.

Perhaps this is the work of advent:  
to resist both despair and complacency,  
to refuse to reconcile ourselves to domination,  
to wait expectantly on the world that is to come  
while also noticing those moments of hope, peace, joy, and love,  
and resting in to them as we wait.

May it be so, and amen.