

The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers

Year C

The Relentless Widow

John Shea



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First Sunday of Advent

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36 *LM* • Luke 21:25-36 *RCL*



Engaging Collapse

A Spiritual Commentary

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. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

Creation is falling apart. Genesis is being reversed. The lamps that God hung in the sky to light the earth—the sun, moon, and stars—are now sending out alarm signals. The waters that once covered everything and that God siphoned off into containers called seas are making a comeback. God had raised up the earth in the midst of the seas, giving people a place to stand secure. But now the seas are seething and roaring, threatening the order of creation with a return to primordial chaos. This noise frightens people, reminding them of Noah’s time and the flood that buried the earth and its unrepentant inhabitants. But what of the rainbow at the end of Noah’s story? What of the pledge that God would never again drown creation?

The rainbow is the Son of Man, the Full Human Being. This one appears as things are falling apart, arriving from a space that transcends collapse. His advent banishes fear and allows his followers to stand up straight. The Son of Man is the new earth, the new place to stand. The waters cannot cover him. He is the redemption that is offered in the midst of a perishing world.

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at

all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

Surviving and engaging collapse depends on knowing where to stand, on finding higher ground. If we give ourselves over to the physical and social world that is collapsing, we will go down with it. We must guard our spirit against triviality, against allowing it to become drunk and bloated with cares so that “neither moth nor rust consumes” (Matt 6:20). These cares weigh us down, do not allow us to move, and make us inattentive to subtle reality. If we do not do this, the collapse will appear to us as a trap, completely capturing us, threatening the total reality of who we are. We will not be aware of our transcendent self. We will have identified with those aspects of ourselves that are vulnerable to breakdown.

Therefore, our task is prayer and vigilance. These disciplines heighten awareness of our spiritual nature, that dimension of ourselves that withstands destruction. Standing secure in this space, we know ourselves as companions of the Son of Man, the Full Human Being. With this new identity, there emerges the courage not only to survive collapse but to engage it. When our worlds fall apart and the prediction is that everyone’s will (“The day I speak of will come upon all who dwell on the face of the earth”), the Son of Man is the name we give to the fearless endeavor of rescue and redemption. It is the name that belongs to all people who, following Jesus, stay vigilant in prayer. Far from shrinking from destruction, we lean into it. We hold one another through and beyond the terrible collapses of life.

But what exactly is falling apart? What are these terrible collapses?

Some take the cosmic symbolism literally. They wait for the end of the space-time world, and buy binoculars to catch the first glimpse of the cloud-riding Son of Man. Their vigil continues.

Some take the cosmic symbolism to express political anarchy, the breakdown of the social order that puts everything at risk. Those who have endured this type of collapse know the truth of this symbolism in their hearts. Their world does fall apart, and the only images that do it justice are pictures of universal, cosmic destruction.

Some take the cosmic symbolism to refer to individual death, the vulnerability of the mind-body organism. We have all seen this collapse in others, and, despite a voracious appetite for self-deception, we cannot convince ourselves we will be spared.

Some take the cosmic symbolism to point to our personally constructed worlds of meaning, the way we put things together, the plans we have formulated and are eagerly implementing. Then our children move away, our job is downsized, our real estate taxes are raised beyond our means, our spouse turns moody and silent—the world we inhabited and hoped would continue is in shambles. The house has fallen. These collapses can be complete or partial. But is there anyone who has not experienced the tentative nature of their personal constructions of meaning?

However we interpret what is collapsing—cosmos, society, mind-body organism, or personal world of meaning—one thing is certain. In human life breakdown is inevitable.

Teaching

Spiritual traditions often characterize people as border walkers. We live at the intersection of the created and the Uncreated, time and eternity, space and infinity, matter and spirit. Evelyn Underhill, a spiritual writer in the Anglican tradition, calls this the two-sided or double reality of human life.

We are, then, faced by two concepts, both needful if we are to make any sense of our crude experience; the historical, natural, and contingent; the timeless, supernatural, and absolute. They must be welded together, if we are to provide a frame for all the possibilities of human life; and that life, whether social or individual, must have both its historically flowing and its changelessly absolute side. (Evelyn Underhill, "Our Two-Fold Relation to Reality" in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy* [New York: SUNY Press, 1988] 164–5)

Although this is the truth of the human condition, Underhill does not think most people are consistently conscious of this situation.

Doubtless for the mass of men such consciousness is still in the rudimentary and sporadic stage. Here and there it does appear among us, though in very unequal degrees. And in so far as we are aware of these two aspects in ourselves and in the universe, we have to strike a working balance between them, if we would rightly harmonize the elements of life and achieve a stable relation with reality. (Ibid.)

Therefore, people face two tasks. The first is to become conscious of the full, two-sided reality of who they are. The second is to learn to "weld" these together, to find a "working balance" between them, to "harmonize" their elements.

But the apocalyptic text for the first Sunday of Advent does not talk in generalities about harmony, welding, and balance. The “historically flowing” and “changelessly absolute” sides are being ripped apart. The hope that is held out is to learn to identify with the “changelessly absolute” side. Grounded in this identity, we are able to relate to the historical flowing. Ancient spirituality valued “harmony, welding, and balance,” but it was also clear-headed about the priority of the spiritual. It held pride of place for the simple reason that it survived historical passage. It did not go down into the dust. A classic statement of this emphasis comes from Vedanta philosophy.

Two birds of golden plumage sat on the same tree. The one above, serene, majestic, immersed in his own glory; the one below restless and eating the fruits of the tree, now sweet, now bitter. Once he ate an exceptionally bitter fruit, then he paused and looked up at the majestic bird above; but he soon forgot about the other bird and went on eating the fruits of the tree as before. Again he ate a bitter fruit, and this time he hopped up a few boughs nearer to the bird at the top. This happened many times until at last the lower bird came to the place of the upper bird and lost himself. He found all at once that there had never been two birds, but that he was all the time that upper bird, serene, majestic, and immersed in his own glory. (Lucinda Vardey, ed., *God in All Worlds: An Anthology of Contemporary Spiritual Writing* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1995] 475)

We do not have to accept the dualism and negative assessment of historical life implied in this text to appreciate the spiritual instinct at its core. How the historically flowing and changelessly absolute sides come together in negative times is that we move closer to the changelessly absolute.

In the most threatening moments of our lives, the Son of Man appears as a protecting nearness that does not permit final destruction. It seems to me this truth entails more than the survival of the soul. It means we have the freedom to engage collapse, to relate to it from the transcendent center of our being. For me the image of the Full Human Being coming on the clouds with power and glory is a magnificent imaginative picture of this possibility that God graciously offers. It has all the flavor and excitement of last-minute rescue. However, another picture, more realistic but no less dramatic, haunts me. It is the earthly Son of Man swallowing the world of collapse with his voice. “Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last” (Mark 15:37).

Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-6



Going Beyond the Mind

A Spiritual Commentary

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

This clever, opening sentence cuts two ways. On one level, it is the proper way to historically date an event. It names the ruling parties, beginning with Roman overlords, proceeding to Jewish rulers, and finally acknowledging Temple authorities. Hierarchical protocol is correctly followed. We know the time and place of John the Baptist by situating him in the context of the major players of the day.

On another level, it is a scathing theological judgment on the Roman and Jewish political leadership and the religious establishment. The Word of God has bypassed them all. The political and religious leaders are meant to be mediations of divine power. Earthly thrones mirror the divine throne; earthly authority participates in divine authority. But the Word of God does not stop at palaces or the temple. Instead, it searches out a priest's son who is also a prophet and finds him in the desert. The desert is a place of purification and inner scrutiny, far from the machinations of power.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

**'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,**

**and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”**

John’s baptism is an outer ritual meant to express and facilitate an inner process. A standard interpretation is: as dirt is washed off by water, so sin is washed away by baptism. Another interpretation sees the submerged person dying to their previous life, returning to the waters of the womb, and emerging from the waters into a new life. Neither of these interpretations names the intricacies of inner process. Instead, they stress change, a transition from one state to another.

The intricacies of the inner change process are captured in the phrase a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” “Repentance” is a translation of the Greek word *metanoia*. *Metanoia* literally means “going beyond the mind.” When we are able to go beyond the mind, forgiveness of sins follows. This is an enigmatic connection. It assumes there is something about the mind that holds onto sins; and there is something about going beyond the mind that lets go of sins.

This going beyond the mind to let go of sins is not an end in itself. For John the Baptist it is the necessary work of preparation. Borrowing the language of Isaiah, he sees himself as a construction worker. He is building a highway for the arrival of the Lord. Whatever is an obstacle will be eliminated. If the road is winding, it will be straightened. If it is rough, it will be smoothed. If a mountain is in the way, it will be flattened. If a valley slows travel time, it will be lifted into a flat surface. The effect of these multiple images is a sense of determination. Whatever is needed to ease the Lord’s arrival will be done. This is a man on a mission.

But what is this “going beyond the mind to let go of sins” preparation for?

The account of Jesus’ baptism gives a symbolic answer. In the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus comes out of the water, he prays. In prayer the sky opens, the Spirit as a dove descends, and the heavenly voice affirms, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). This is the goal of the going beyond the mind and forgiving sins. It readies the baptized person to hear the transcendent word of love. Without forgiveness of sins, people are blind and deaf to the descent of the dove and the voice from the sky. The full process entails going beyond the mind to let go of sins and receive the Holy Spirit. This is what happens to Jesus, and this is what can happen to his followers. John’s highway is ultimately a path to let God get close, to make it possible to welcome Jesus as the Giver of the Spirit.

Teaching

The mind has a mind of its own. Thoughts think themselves, seemingly undirected by the thinker. The discovery of this simple and undeniable facet of our makeup can be quite startling. We fantasize we are in complete control of mental processes. However, the actual situation seems to be quite different. When we concentrate, we can focus thinking along a certain path. But if we relax attention, certain automatic mental processes kick in. The automatic process that concerns John the Baptist is how we deal with the wounds that have been inflicted on us and the wounds we have inflicted on others. In religious language, his focus is on how the mind seduces us into identifying with sin.

There is an adhesive quality about sinful experiences. They stick. We remember the beatings, the humiliations, the hateful glances, and the mocking words. The wrongs done to us are available to memory in a way neutral and even positive experiences are not. Although the experience of sin begins with being sinned against, we are quick learners in this way of being human. We soon learn to wound others. We engage in hitting, lying, cheating, betraying, etc. We need to protect and promote ourselves at all costs. Any behavior that appears to further this narrow and intense self-preoccupation we embrace. Soon we can tell our life story in term of blows received and blows given. It is a tale of sin; and even if we repress it, it secretly shapes our sense of who we are.

This attraction of the mind to the negative has a cumulative effect. As the mind simultaneously nurtures a sense of victimhood and wallows in guilt over its own mistakes, sin rises to a new status in the interior life. We gradually begin to identify with the sinful dimension of our lives. In our own eyes, we become, above all else, one who has been sinned against and one who sins in turn. We are the receiver and giver of blows, and the highest compliment is, "He gave as good as he got." The mind is convinced this is the "real us," and it defends this identity by citing facts and providing rationalizations. Nothing can disprove this obvious truth.

However, there is an important distinction to be made in telling this inner story of sin. The distinction is between what has happened and what the mind does with what has happened. We *really* have been maltreated, victims of the wrongdoing of others; and we *really* have maltreated others, making them victims of our wrongdoing. Not to acknowledge this active participation in the sin of the world is to be either incredibly dense or in chronic denial.

But the point is not the sheer factuality of moral evil. The point is what the mind does with these experiences. It enthrones them as the secret and irreversible truth about the human person. Sinner becomes the depth identity, the loudest interior noise that blocks out any refuting voices. The result is an ever-deepening connection of who we are with the wrongs done to us and by us.

This inner escalation of sin raises the gospel question: "Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles?" (Matt 7:16). If we think we are unredeemed sinners, we will not bear fruit. We will not ripen and blossom with compassion, justice, love, and respect. Most importantly, we will not be able to hear the real name that Jesus calls us. Our identification with sin becomes a serious roadblock—a mountain in the way, a winding and rough path that means slow travel, a valley that delays arrival. Jesus cannot get to us with his radical address that we are the light of the world, the salt of the earth, and a blessedness that is always present no matter what external circumstances prevail. When we cling to our identity as sinner, his words cannot penetrate the armor of our hardened self-evaluation. He is not the One Who Is to Come, but the One Sin Keeps Away. That is why John the Baptist is needed as preparation for Christ. He enables people to go beyond the mind and let go of sins.

This repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins is a subtle process, but it is not an impossible one. Two key insights often help us. The first insight involves our awareness of the nature of the mind. When we become aware of the powerful tendency of the mind to hold onto sin, we are already beyond it. We see what it is doing, and so we are more than it. We transcend the mind by noticing how it works. When this happens, a sense of spaciousness replaces the sense of restriction and a sense of freedom replaces the sense of compulsion. We feel we have walked through a door into a hidden room that feels like home. We are closer to who we really are.

The second insight involves an implication of the basic Christian conviction of the unconditional forgiveness of God. God is ultimate reality and, therefore, if God holds the sin, the sin transcends the flow of time and remains permanently present. But if God has let go of the sin, then who is holding on? The forgiveness of God clears the way for us to see where the real action is. The real action is the mind and how it clings to negative evaluations. The question changes from "Will God forgive me?" to "How can I go beyond the mind that clings to sin, even though God has forgiven me?"

Before we can hear the words that Jesus heard, “You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased,” we will have to undergo John’s baptism which entails a repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins. If we do this, the path is cleared.

Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:10-18 *LM* • Luke 3:7-18 *RCL*



Repenting Forever

A Spiritual Commentary

The crowds asked John the Baptist, "What then should we do?"

In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?"

He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Spiritual development always entails both understanding and action, mental realization and behavioral integration, interior illumination and outer righteousness. In the life of any individual these two aspects are always interacting, coming together and breaking apart in myriad ways. The standard connection is the logical movement from understanding to action. For example, if people love their neighbors, they will share their resources with them. The interior love manifests itself in handing over the second coat. Although thinking like this abounds in moral theology, things are never quite this simple.

A different connection is established when the seekers ask for an action plan, "What are we to do?" and the teacher is willing to provide one. Then the seekers try to implement the action plan. In doing this, they have to return again and again to their interior consciousness. When action is abstractly conceived, it always unfolds without a hitch. But when action is concretely engaged, it hesitates and stumbles. Although there are always exterior factors to take into account and

reevaluate, seekers invariably discover mental blocks. Their desire to do an action is undercut by their own mental conditioning. Therefore, they are thrown back into the reciprocal flow between understanding and action, mental realization and behavioral integration, inner illumination and outer righteousness.

We can imagine the spiritual paths of these groups of people who made the mistake of asking John what they should do. The crowds would find themselves holding onto their second coat and extra bread and old sandals, etc. "What is enough?" they might ask themselves. "Do I jeopardize myself for someone who hasn't worked as hard as I have?" The tax collectors have done well with their thumb on the scale. "Can we take a cutback in revenue? Is not this the expected way of doing things? Will I lose my position if I go against the common practice?" Soldiers, by definition, push people around. After all, they don't teach dancing. Who would know they were soldiers if they stopped bullying people, threatening to denounce them falsely, and making a little on the side? Their pay is meant to be supplemented in this way. When we attempt to change morally, we have to work on the inside to sustain different behavior on the outside.

The spiritual teacher knows any outer action will inevitably lead to the discovery of inner reluctances and obstacles. John the Baptist is about removing obstacles. The first step toward removing obstacles is discovering them. There is no better way to uncover inner blocks than trying to do something that entails a change in the way we have previously worked. What seems like simple advice from John the Baptist becomes a journey of self-discovery.

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their heart concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah. John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

There is poignancy in the character of John the Baptist. He correctly understands that he is not the Messiah but the forerunner of one mightier than himself. He must learn from that one, for he is not fit to loosen his

sandal strap. This attitude of learning from the One Who Is to Come will be important, for what John envisions will not be what will come about.

John foresees a baptism in “the Holy Spirit and fire.” But he mistakenly assumes this Holy Spirit and fire means judgment and destruction. The Holy Spirit becomes a rough wind that separates the wheat and the chaff when the winnowing fan lifts it into the air, and fire awaits the combustible chaff. Wind (Holy Spirit) and fire work together to separate the good from the bad and to reward the good and punish the bad.

However, when Jesus comes, he will be the source of the Holy Spirit and fire in a quite different way. He will connect people to God so that the Holy Spirit can work through them to such a degree that people will see their “good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). This Holy Spirit will inspire and direct their lives, providing the commitment to carry out John’s agenda of reform. The Holy Spirit is the spiritual energy to share with others and not oppress them. This is the fire that both purifies every moral effort and provides the passion to persevere. It is a fire that burns without burning out, the fire of the bush that energized Moses in his relentless efforts to free the people from slavery (Exod 3:2).

Teaching

The crowds asked him, “What should we do?”

Glad you asked.

Pick a value. It must be a transcendent value, one that is grounded in God. Not one of those contemporary whims that pass as values, like “keeping in touch.”

I mean a real value, like compassion or forgiveness or reconciliation or peace or justice. Something that has some bite in it and will be around long after you’re gone. Something moths and rust cannot consume and thieves cannot break in and steal. For example, let’s take compassion.

Now take ten minutes a day in the morning and meditate on it. Clear your mind of other thoughts and distractions. If they continue to intrude, just notice them and let them go. Return to compassion.

It is good to have a phrase to repeat silently and mindfully. Some Buddhists think equality is the path to compassion, and they suggest a phrase like “Everyone wants to be happy and doesn’t want to suffer.” As you slowly and silently repeat this phrase that makes you equal

with everyone else, pictures of people you know may enter your mind. Simply use their name in the next phrase, "Joan wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer . . . Frank wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer," and every so often say, "I want to be happy and don't want to suffer." Now you are in the human mess with everyone else.

When you have done this for about ten minutes, get on with the day. Don't evaluate how the meditation is going. Dismiss all questions like "Did I do it right? Why am I doing this? Did I waste my time?" Just continue to do it.

Also you should read some stuff on compassion. Meditation is not enough. Over the long haul it will heighten your awareness of opportunities for compassionate action. But, in itself, it won't make you much smarter about compassion. You need to read and ponder, to reflect on what you are reading.

Try this little story from Parker Palmer.

At Pendle Hill, the Quaker community where I lived and worked for eleven years, our lives were so intertwined that people could quickly become attached to each other and just as quickly become alienated. But *alienated* is a mild word to describe my relation to one woman who lived there. She was, in my mind, the devil's spawn, sent here directly from the pits of hell to destroy all that is green and good about life on earth.

The people at Pendle Hill gather every morning in a "meeting for worship," forty-five minutes of communal silence, occasionally broken by words spoken spontaneously from the heart. One morning, I arrived late for worship, and the only seat available was next to *her*. Agitated, I came close to turning around and walking out. But I managed somehow to sit down, close my eyes, and start to meditate, slowly forgetting that I was sitting next to a creature from the dark side.

About half an hour later, head still bowed, I opened my eyes and found myself staring at the upturned hand this woman had rested on her knee. There, spotlighted by a shaft of sunlight, I saw the faint but steady throb of an artery in her wrist, the elemental beat of her very human heart. In that moment, I knew beyond words that here was a person just like me, with strengths and weaknesses, hopes and disappointments, joys and despairs. In that moment, my sense of who she was, and of who I was to her, underwent some sort of transformation.

I never became close to this woman. In truth, I never stopped feeling wary of her. But I could no longer demonize her as I had until that silent, sunlit moment. (Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004] 155-6)

Think about this reading. And find other stuff on compassion. You need to supplement your spiritual practice with spiritual wisdom.

Now for the really important part. At the end of the day, take some time to review the day in the light of your spiritually grounded value of compassion. No doubt you will notice some things that could have been done differently if you had remembered your value of compassion.

Well, get on the phone or email and redo that situation. Don't let embarrassment stop you. Just do it. You may be awkward at first, but you'll get used to it.

This is repenting. Repentance is not what bad people have to do. It is what people who live out of transcendent values find necessary. Most of us don't get it right the first time. We only notice we could have done it differently "over our shoulder." But when we see a more compassionate way, we have to act on it. This is how we get better. A little.

Getting better means seeing a compassionate way while a situation is actually unfolding. Most likely the first time this happens you will have to pause to figure out what is going on. In the pause a response will come to you. Yes, a response will come to you. It will not be a carefully worked out strategy with all the pluses and minuses lined up in columns for you to evaluate. You will suddenly see it. Like it was there all along but you didn't notice it. When it comes to you like that, this is the Holy Spirit. Say, "Thank you."

And act on what you see. The courage to act on what you see will also come from the Holy Spirit. Say, "Thank you."

Although you have compassion in your heart and you saw what to do and you did it, it may not have worked out very well. That's not the Holy Spirit. That's you. Redo it. Redoing and pausing/pausing and redoing are partners. Where there is one, you'll find the other.

After a while, you'll think, "I'm getting pretty damn good at this. I am probably the most compassionate person in this whole organization (family, neighborhood, etc.)." That's your ego wanting to separate you from other people in order to feel superior. Say, "No thank you."

Instead, humbly recommit yourself to your spiritual practice on compassion, your spiritual reading on compassion, and your experiments in bringing compassion into all you do. That's fire, the steady burning that does not burn out. Of course, by now you know where this perseverance comes from, so say, "Thank you."

One last thing. This process is never over. Repenting is forever. Get used to it.