

***Apocalypse, Now?***  
An Advent 2 Sermon  
Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10  
Sunday, December 9, 2007  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

I recently read a poem entitled, “The Ballad of Woodrow Wilson”<sup>1</sup> by contemporary writer Michael Lind. In only a few lines, it tells a story about a remarkable train trip the former president embarked upon on July 4, 1919. At the end of World War I, members of the Wilson Administration worked with several European allies at the Paris Peace Conference in Versailles to craft both a peace treaty with Germany and a proposal that would call for the creation of a new international organization called the League of Nations. But when President Wilson returned from Paris, he faced a skeptical electorate that was disillusioned and apathetic toward world affairs.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the opposition was formidable with the “militant wing of the women’s suffrage group and a new coalition of revolutionary right wing groups and internationalist left wing groups”<sup>3</sup> turning against the initiative. Feeling that he had no other alternative if he was to win approval for the treaties in the U.S. Senate, Wilson set out upon a grueling 8,000-mile train trip across the country delivering over forty major speeches in an effort to turn the tide.

Listen now to “The Ballad of Woodrow Wilson.”

Tall as the morning, he told the crowd  
from his railroad car:  
“The League of Nations is our chance  
to save the world from war.”

Columbus and St. Louis, then  
Des Moines. “A heaven-sent  
occasion to preserve the peace,”  
declared the President.

In Omaha he had a cough.  
The rocking of the train  
prevented him from sleeping all

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Lind, “The Ballad of Woodrow Wilson,” from *Parallel Lives*, quoted at “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Tuesday, 4 December, 2007, <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Return to Isolationism – Between the Wars,” PBS Video Index Online, [http://videoindex.pbs.org/program/all\\_chapters.asp?item\\_id=7770](http://videoindex.pbs.org/program/all_chapters.asp?item_id=7770).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

across the starry plain.

“America’s the savior of  
the world,” the towns-folk heard  
in Bismarck. On to Cour d’Alene:  
“I give you all my word.”

In San Diego he was tense,  
in Salt Lake City terse.  
“Without the League, another war  
will come, a war much worse.”

At Pueblo, Woodrow Wilson saw  
the children and exclaimed:  
“These boys, when they are grown, must not  
be drafted, killed and maimed,”

He gripped the railing. “All our boys,  
they will have died in vain  
if we should fail...” The curtains closed  
on the departing train.

The waiting crowd in Wichita  
was told the president  
was ill. Eastward across the grass  
the locomotive went.

The engine, with a long deep wail,  
dragged the curtained car  
over the miles of track that soon  
the boys would ride to war.

The poem ends apocalyptically as President Wilson’s health collapses in Pueblo, Colorado and he is rushed by train back to Washington. Soon after his arrival, he “suffered a severe stroke that left him partially paralyzed, practically blind, and unaware of the seriousness of his own condition. Mrs. Wilson, later referred to by historians as the first *de facto* woman president of the United States, carefully isolated him to shield him from the stresses of the outside world. Even members of his cabinet were unaware of how feeble his condition was.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

When the Senate voted on the two treaties on November 19 of that same year, it denied U.S. participation in the League of Nations and declined to ratify the Treaty of Versailles (choosing instead to enter into a separate peace treaty with Germany two years later).

In the presidential elections of 1920, President Wilson was defeated by Warren Harding who, in his Inaugural Address in 1921, promised to “put a stop to Wilsonian internationalism, by declaring the primacy of nationalism and exhorting a patriotic devotion to safeguard, stabilize, and prosper America first.”<sup>5</sup> In many ways, Wilson was a lonely voice crying in the wilderness.

Historians today continue to debate the merits of Woodrow Wilson’s presidency and the radical initiative that pre-dated the formation of the United Nations by almost twenty-six years. “The question in 1919, a question that remains even to this day, is the degree to which nations are willing to sacrifice a significant portion of their sovereignty to a higher body.”<sup>6</sup> Wilson’s warnings against an isolationist, inward-looking national posture were ignored by a majority of politicians from both parties – setting, perhaps, the context for the very slow and reluctant entry by the United States into World War II. Even when verifiable reports began to come out of eastern Europe in the late 1930’s claiming that the Third Reich was incarcerating hundreds of thousands of Jews, the United States stayed on the sideline. Only after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941 did President Roosevelt feel he had the support to move out of an isolationist foreign policy.

There have always been apocalyptic voices that warn of disaster and devastation. In biblical literature, one of the greatest of these, of course, is John the Baptist, that strangely stubborn, iconoclastic figure who appeared in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming the need for urgent repentance because of the advent of the kingdom of heaven.

When the crowds from Jerusalem come down to the Jordan River to hear what this man is saying, he quotes Isaiah: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” But when he has their attention, he turns up the heat: “You brood of vipers!

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Versailles 1919,” Academic American History, <http://www.academicamerican.com/progressive/topics/versailles.html>.

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

Then John the baptizer turns personal: “I baptize with water for repentance,” he says. “But one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Of course, the apocalyptic figure that he refers to in this season of Advent is Jesus – but not as infant in a manger. To the texture of the “armor of light” suggested by last Sunday’s passage from Romans, we must add today a deeper, more disturbing texture of fire and judgment.

In the great texts for the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass, the “Dies Irae” (or “Day of Wrath”) is by far the most dramatic and apocalyptic. Based on a 14<sup>th</sup> century Latin hymn, the words echo the message from John the Baptist:

*“Dies iræ! dies illa, solvet sæclum in favilla. Teste David cum Sibylla!”* (meaning, “Day of wrath! O day of mourning! See fulfilled the prophets’ warning, heaven and earth in ashes burning!”).

*“Confutatis maledictis, flammis acribus addictis: voca me cum benedictis”* (meaning, “While the wicked are confounded, doomed to flames of woe unbounded call me with thy saints surrounded.”).<sup>7</sup>

If you are a lover of classical music, I would suggest to you that the “Dies Irae” from the *Requiem* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is one of the most stunning and overwhelming moments in all of music. To the faithful, one is meant to literally tremble before the onslaught of the ferocious, thunderous music. To the faithful, the “Dies Irae” is an urgent call to make ready for the Lord’s coming. The ancient hymn cries out:

*“Oro supplex et acclinis, cor contritum quasi cinis: gere curam mei finis.”* (“Low I kneel, with heart submission, see, like ashes, my contrition; help me in my last condition.”)<sup>8</sup>

John’s warning of disaster, upon which this great text is in part based, calls on all of us with the community of believers to reorder our lives, indeed, to kneel in repentance and humility before the One who comes.

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<sup>7</sup> “Dies Irae,” from Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dies\\_Irae](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dies_Irae).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Biblical scholar Eugene Boring says, “The action of God in history is often sudden, unexpected, and, to our own eyes, even intrusive. The will of God cannot be equated with group progress, human growth, or social development, arising naturally out of the human possibility. God’s will does not always work gently, climbing quietly like ivy up the lattice of history. Sometimes an Elijah appears, a nation repents, a Berlin Wall is dismantled, a Martin Luther King, Jr., strides across the landscape. God’s will shatters the mold, violates the categories, breaks in on the world as a jarring surprise. So the doors of Matthew’s Gospel suddenly swing open, and there stands John in the wilderness of Judea, looking for all the world like Elijah of old. It’s a shock to see him.”<sup>9</sup>

If the question surrounding the debate in 1919 over the League of Nations was the degree to which nations are willing to sacrifice a significant portion of their sovereignty to a higher body, the question of Advent is very similar. To what degree are individuals and nations now willing to sacrifice our own independence and sovereignty to the highest authority, even the coming of God in the form of this man Jesus who shakes and unsettles the whole of creation to give birth to the kingdom?

It does not take a great effort to look for signs that all of us are in need of repentance. If there is an emerging scandal this weekend over the unwillingness by the CIA to come clean over its interrogation techniques which allegedly include torture methods banned by the Geneva Convention, you and I are no better. We, too, live under scrutiny by the Lord God Almighty for our covert behavior which runs contrary to the direction of the kingdom that is breaking in.

If the administration was embarrassed this week when it was revealed that a government intelligence assessment indicated that Iran halted a covert program to develop nuclear weapons four years ago, you and I are no better off. We, too, along with people in every time and generation are confronted by John’s blunt Advent warning that we stray far from the truth in justifying personal behavior that is unjustifiable.

In the season of Advent, everything and everyone comes under the same scrutiny for everything and everyone is in need of radical, systemic repentance. Uncomfortably, these days in December are meant to be spent

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<sup>9</sup> M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 158 ff. Dr. Boring is Professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, in Forth Worth.

more in prayer, reflection, and repentance than they are in buying gifts for loved ones who, in large part, do not need them. That's part of the reason, I think, that I delay putting out my own crèche until after the appearance of John the Baptist on the Second Sunday in Advent.

Tom Troeger, professor of homiletics at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, writes, "I used to have a colleague who was an anthropologist and a theologian. One of her favorite sayings was 'Culture is to human beings as water is to fish.' It is an insight with important implications. It suggests that we cannot survive without the ability to distinguish between what is healthy and what is pathological in a culture. As long as water is pure and filled with sufficient oxygen and food, fish thrive. But if the water becomes polluted, if the oxygen level is suppressed by toxins, and if the food supply decreases, the very element that gives them life turns against them. It can make them ill or even kill them. The same is true of the culture in which we live. None of us can afford to live uncritically in the culture that surrounds us. We need some way of testing its purity and toxicity, some way of making clear judgments about what we are ingesting, some way of achieving a degree of objectivity about things that we otherwise take for granted."<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in the face of judgment and the Day of Wrath, all of us, without exception, are in need of hope in order to hang on – and for that, we have to wait, liturgically, to next week, the Third Sunday in Advent, when we light the candle of hope.

In the meantime, Anne Lamott, a fresh and blunt voice in contemporary Christian writing, says, "Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up... I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."<sup>11</sup>

And for that, we say, "Thanks be to God. Amen."

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, *Homiletic*, Summer 2002, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Lamott, quoted at [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/anne\\_lamott/](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/anne_lamott/).