

## **Preparing for the Unpreparable**

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**Luke 21:25-36**

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Can I just say I hate the word ‘new normal,’ but I don’t really know why. Maybe it is because it claims to know the future with more certainty than I am willing to give credit for. It feels smug. How are you so sure what the new normal is that you are willing to say ‘this, x, whatever x is, is the new normal.’ Part of this, I admit, is my own stubborn Scots Irish skepticism about those claiming authority telling me what is the ‘new normal.’ I might as well admit that inner voice getting triggered any time it hears the words ‘new normal,’ and immediately going there saying inaudibly no one is going to tell me what the ‘new normal’ is. On top of that, ‘new normal’ is used to describe circumstances that just sound preposterous even if a pandemic has altered our lives for a while. In the future, we will only shop from Amazon and never leave our houses. That is the ‘new normal.’ In the future, everyone will work from home even if you are all fighting for bandwidth and need five computer screens and Zoom accounts. That will be the new normal. If we wanted to let our cynicism get the best of us, I bet we could develop a whole cottage industry called ‘The New Normal.’ We could predict the future and write books about the ‘new normal church,’ or the ‘new normal’ lifestyle, the ‘new normal’ job market, the ‘new normal’ household, etc., etc.

Perhaps the other thing that is bothersome about confident predictions in the ‘new normal’ is how quickly they foreclose on recovering what was good about the past that we were all missing. One of the beautiful features of the church that was temporarily taken away during the pandemic was the meaningful relationships that we all share in Christian community and how much joy, thanksgiving, meaning, and identity, we derive from being together, seeing each other, sharing in joys and sorrow, table fellowship, conversations with one another on the sidewalk or in the classroom or in the pew. When we all had to go online during the pandemic and try to do much of our church content digitally, the only reason we were able to sustain all that was because of the enormous social capital built up in our prior relationships, community, and the ties that bind. But while online content, streaming of services, and hybrid delivery of educational content, may be part of our future, it is not a substitute for what we mean when we say church or community or even Christianity. I realize that a church is more than a building, more than windows, pews, the sights, and smells of this place, but it also cannot be reduced to online content. There is something about public worship, gathering together, sharing in each other’s company and lives, gathering in sacred spaces like this, touching the pages of a hymnal, running our hands across the smooth wooden backs of the pews, baptizing babies, sharing tears, laughter, and the common grind of life, that cannot be nourished

by online content, no matter how efficient, less complicated, and 'new normal' it may feel.

One more annoying feature of the 'new normal,' and then I promise I will stop...is the assumption that we are all progressing in some direction in which our lives are automatically headed increasingly defined as 'consumers,' and nothing more, whether it is consumers of goods, services, and products, consumers of food, consumers of experiences, and that is all that we are, and all that is just a given and something that we should all just accept as the 'new normal.' But what if our lives are meant for more than consumption; what if reducing life to such a basic function dehumanizes us or at the very least turns us into two-dimensional beings whose sole function in this world is simply to consume more product and content, whether it be commercial, technological, or religious. A very sad and self-absorbed activity...in fact, consumption on its own does not even require another human being to accomplish it--we can do it by ourselves without the help of others—which can make it soulless. Descartes enlightenment dictum cogito ergo sum, 'I think therefore I am,' which may have reduced us to another kind of intellectual reductionism or brains on a stick, was at least somewhat idealist about the potential for humanity. I don't think 'consumo ergo sum,' I consume therefore I am, is much of an improvement there. I remember the first time in a history class learning about the Luddites and thinking what a sad assortment of people to be driven to the point of near insanity by the Industrial Revolution that they would form mobs that would attack the new machines and try to destroy them because they were threatened and these machines were making them obsolete and the 'new normal' was destroying their identity. Later I remember reading that J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the Lord of the Rings, was influenced by the Luddites and idealized the pre-industrial Revolution villages of his childhood, depicting them in his books as the 'shire' and the home of his beloved 'hobbits.' Obviously, we can't destroy machines or idealize the pre-industrial age as the glory days, but I wonder if the Luddites protest and Tolkien's idealization of such times do not have something to teach us about the dignity of humanity that cannot be encapsulated and accomplished in the name of efficiency, comfort, and ease. What is the saying about ships...'a ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are made for...' A human life can have it all, consume it all, experience everything, enjoy greater efficiency, and as little as hardship as possible, but I wonder if that is what a human life is made for?

Which brings us back to our passage from Luke...it does not feel very hot cocoa and marshmellowy does it? Jesus prepares us for Advent by warning of '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.' Jesus prepares us for his coming by warning us that 'people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.' Our redemption comes not with a whimper but with a roar, with 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.' Where is the peppermint

mocha and the 'all is calm, all is bright' lead-up we want to script for Advent? Just this week in the *Wall Street Journal*, writer Michelle Slatalla points to a modern-day Advent phenomenon that may have even further jumped the shark. She writes: 'today's Advent calendars leave nothing to the imagination. Decades after abandoning their original Christmas purpose of making the season of preparation for Jesus' birth, many have morphed into a showy form of holiday décor. Or worse.' She laments that they are 'like vending machines that disgorge everything from expensive beauty products to flavors of pork cracklings to, in the case of Tiffany's \$150,000 4-foot cabinet, 24 wrapped boxes of jewelry and trinkets.'<sup>1</sup> Luke does not even give us your basic straightforward chocolate Advent calendar, but instead prepares us with great disruption, fear and foreboding, and a Messiah who doesn't just come to hand us all eggnog lattes and make sure we are comfortable, but One who comes to disrupt us, to keep us from reducing our lives to something self-absorbed and consumable, a Messiah who comes to help us spend our lives for others and to set us free to find the richness of life, not in consuming, getting, acquiring, and using, but in giving, building, foregoing, and loving.

There is something impossible about Advent. We are encouraged to prepare, to participate in Advent devotionals, to take up additional Advent spiritual practices, to light candles, to sing 'prepare the way of the world,' all the while knowing in the back of our minds or in our preparations that we are preparing for the impossible and the unpreparable. I remember in the days leading up to the birth of our first child hearing from more than one seasoned parent how much our life would change, how I must have looked like a deer in the headlights, because I was told, what seemed like over and over and over again, 'your life is going to change...you are not going to know what hit you...everything is going to be different.' And I liked my life just fine and didn't really want to see it in a state of upheaval and disrupted by another new creation. And they were probably right, and while there was some preparation I could do for this new life, nothing could really prepare you until it came. And there is no way we can adequately prepare for this Messiah who comes, no way we can fully grasp the height, the depth, and the breadth of this Christ child who comes, no way we can create the right experience to make us feel like we have all the right feels this Advent. The coming of Christ creates a certain amount of dissonance with us and in us and in our world, reminding us that part of this Messiah's job is to sabotage our warm and placid notions of the good life, shatter our expectations of a 'new normal,' and shock us into seeing ourselves, our world, and each other as so much more than efficient little cogs in the machinery of consumption. We prepare because we know something is happening that demands our attention. We prepare because we know we are not just meant to sit safely at harbor, even if we don't

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Slatalla, 'Advent Calendars Have Become Luxury Vending Machines. Is that OK?' *Wall Street Journal*, November 26, 2021.

know where we are headed and how this coming Messiah might put us to use. We prepare because while our preparations may never make us ready or adequately prepare us for the coming Messiah, Advent reminds us that our lives are meant for more than just 'the new normal,' we are meant for more than just getting by from one season and Advent calendar to the next, we are meant for more than just what we can consume, even if we know that the One who is coming is someone and something you can never fully prepare for. Try not to recoil if I suggest this...but disruption, preparing for the unpreparable, hoping for the impossible, maybe THAT is the new normal...