

The First Sunday of Advent, Year C
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
November 28, 2021
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-9
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

A Promise Not a Puzzle or a Threat

On the morning of Thursday, March 21, 1844, thousands of people in Massachusetts prepared themselves for Christ to appear by nightfall of that day.

They were known as Millerites because they followed the teachings of William Miller. Because they believed in Christ's imminent return, they were also called Adventists.

Their leader, William Miller, a former Deist turned Baptist, had made thorough calculations and predicted some years before that the second Advent of Christ would happen between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844.

Alas, nightfall came, and March 21 became March 22. They had waited in vain.

After this, William Miller, a Massachusetts farmer and lay Baptist preacher, accepted the alternate prediction of some of his followers that the actual date of the Advent would be October 22, 1844.

A great comet, clearly visible at midday in Massachusetts in the spring of 1844, was taken by many as a sign of the end of the world.

Because of this ominous portent, despite Miller's earlier miscalculation, thousands more people joined the Millerites between March and October. Most of them were in Massachusetts, but in total, an estimated 100,000 people in the northeastern United States were counting on Christ's return on October 22.

As the day approached, many of these devout believers sold or gave away or destroyed their possessions, believing they would not need them any longer. People deferred marriage because they would soon be in heaven where "they are neither married nor given in marriage."

Some of the Millerites, wanting to be properly attired for heaven, sewed for themselves long, white garments which they called their "ascension robes." A man in the town of Harvard sold his cows at a great loss because he was worried there would be no one to care for them after he had "gone up." Women in the city of Worcester gave away their jewelry and pulled all adornments from their clothing.

At last, the day came. On October 22, a Thursday, many of the Adventists climbed mountains or hills fully expecting to meet the Lord in the air before the day was over. A few people even climbed up into trees just past midnight and waited perched upon branches.

The anticipated Advent did not happen on October 22 either. The sincere hopes of thousands of people were dashed. Many of them reported crying bitterly until daybreak the following morning after what has been known ever since as the Great Disappointment of 1844.

William Miller himself stopped making predictions. He distanced himself from efforts by some of his followers to recalibrate, rehabilitate, reinterpret his predictions concerning Christ's second Advent.

Hiram Edson reinterpreted Miller's prediction, saying that on October 22 something important did happen. That was when Christ entered the heavenly holy of holies for the first time and began making final preparations to return.

Ellen Gould White began having a series of visions. She agreed with Edson. And they both agreed with Joseph Bates that Christians should worship on the Jewish Sabbath not on Sunday.

Ellen Gould White, Hiram Edson, and Joseph Bates founded a new denomination. Some years later, it would come to be called the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

What about the rest of those 100,000 people who lived through the Great Disappointment of 1844? They were not only disappointed but also bewildered and disillusioned. People mocked them, called them names in the street. A few of them were beaten up. They took many paths after this non-event.

Those who retained their Millerite beliefs formed three main factions. One of those factions became another denomination, the Advent Christian Church.

Some of those who ceased being Millerites never professed faith in anything ever again. Some returned to their previous denominations.

Some of them stopped working, saying saved people don't have to work. Some of them said since we must be as children to enter God's kingdom, childish behavior was not only acceptable but desirable. And they acted thusly.

Some were convinced that Christ was now seated on a cloud and had to be actively prayed down. A good number of them joined another new millennialist movement of the 1840s, the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearance, better known as the Shakers.

Why this lengthy history lesson? One reason, truth be told, is that one area of my doctoral training is in US religious histories and cultures. I love this stuff.

Another reason is to highlight the plenitude of responses and reactions to the Great Disappointment. All of these people went through the same experience of deep collective trauma, but they emerged from it in many different directions. What might that say to us in our particular moment as not only we but the entire world, step by step, emerge from a global pandemic that has lasted twenty months and counting? It has been event after event after event of collective trauma. We are now people living in a moment with many “Greats.” Have you heard? The Great Resignation, the Great Relocation, and others have been coined. What if in this moment, this period, there was also the Great Emergence of new life and vitality in Christ’s one holy catholic and apostolic church?

The main reason, however, for telling you about the Millerites and Adventists is to give a detailed example from our own national history of people taking passages like our gospel text today as an invitation from Jesus to try to figure out exactly when he will come again.

Our gospel passage today is from what is sometimes called Luke’s little apocalypse. It reminds us of the apocalyptic mindset of our forebears at the beginning of the Jesus movement.

The Millerites and Adventists were in some ways like those ancestors: they expected the second coming of Christ. Any minute.

Jesus in today’s gospel reminds us that there will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars, including comets; there will be distress among nations and people fainting from fear and foreboding; and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

His point is *not* that these things will happen and keep happening and that if we can interpret them just right, we will know exactly when he will return. It’s not a puzzle to be worked out.

His point is that we will be accompanied by the Holy Spirit, our advocate and guide, through all of these seeming world-ending things as they continue to happen in every generation. Our redemption is ever drawing near. We are not abandoned or forsaken. We are accompanied and held close.

His point is that he will come again, in glory, to judge the living and the dead. And his reign will have no end. And it’s a promise—not a threat.

Today we begin Advent which we keep for the four Sundays before Christmas and all the weekdays between today and Christmas.

Always on the first Sunday of Advent, we have a gospel that encourages us to remain alert.

Today that word comes in a parable: pay attention; notice when the leaves of the fig tree and other trees begin to leaf out. Read the signs. Don't be distracted by false alarms. Keep traveling the right road.

All around us we are experiencing a rush to the manger and the arrival of the babe of Bethlehem and his adoring visitors, especially the ones toting presents.

And yet, here in this beautiful and sacred place, adorned with greens and the shades of blue that remind us of midnight and the blue hour just past sunset and Mary, we hold space for something else, something different, something deeper, something more expansive. Not rush, but wait.

We wait. We keep the season of Advent. It's the season of preparing and making room and waiting. Not waiting around twiddling our thumbs. Not running around to look busy 'cause Jesus is coming. But active, hopeful, preparatory waiting. Like waiting a table and providing hospitality. On the alert, paying attention, aware of what is needed, and moving into action at the proper time.

Active, hopeful, expectant waiting. Like playing or singing a piece of music and coming to a rest: the music rests; the players stop playing; the singers stop singing; but they attend to what comes next.

This is the waiting of Advent, the season of awaiting and preparing for and remembering the multiple comings of Christ.

Jesus the Christ came into human history, to live and die as one of us.

Jesus the Christ comes to us all the time, incarnated in people and circumstances we may not immediately recognize as him, as the stranger, the guest; and he comes each time in the mystery of the Eucharist.

Jesus the Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. It's a promise, not a puzzle. A promise, not a threat. It is good news, and we proclaim it together in the creed every week. His dominion will have no end.

As we wait and prepare and expect, I leave you with these words, a portion of David Whyte's poem *Coleman's Bed*:

See with every turning day,
how each season makes a child
of you again, wants you to become a seeker
after rainfall and birdsong,
watch how it weathers you to a testing

in the tried and true, tells you
with each falling leaf, to leave and slip away
even from the branch that held you,
to go when you need to, to be courageous,
to be like a last word you'd want to say
before you leave the world.

To read further about the Great Disappointment of 1844:

<https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/millerites-await-end-of-the-world.html>

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-61/american-adventism-great-disappointment.html>

<https://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/great-disappointment-remembered-170-years-on>

<https://adventist.news/news/seventh-day-adventist-church-emerged-from-religious-fervor-of-19th-century>

<https://shop.catholic.com/blog/the-great-disappointment/>