

Luke
Year C

**THE
RELENTLESS WIDOW**

The Spiritual Wisdom
of the Gospels for
Christian Preachers
and Teachers



JOHN SHEA

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of the Gospels for
Christian Preachers
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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).