

Advent 1, 2025, Year A
Isaiah 2.1-5, Matthew 24.36-44

I've been watching the TV series *The Leftovers*. I think it's an extraordinary piece of television – so insightful into the human condition. The central premise of the show is that some years prior to the main action of the series, a percentage of the world's population just vanished. Babies, children, adults, elderly – just gone. Everyone knows someone who lost someone that day, and the programme traces society's hectic search for answers to the unanswerable questions that it raised for people. Nihilistic cults form. Some people lean into the senseless horror of it all. Others become incredibly certain about their interpretation of the departure, and what will happen on its anniversaries. We watch aghast as characters sacrifice everything to follow their mystical readings of co-incidences or invest psychosis with saintliness. Everyone is searching for some kind of mental map, an interpretive grid that will tell them that there is still meaning, order, direction and benevolence tying together the fabric of the universe.

The Leftovers is a compelling meditation on the different ways people struggle to live meaningfully and faithfully in a world that often seems cruel and arbitrary, and where we don't know why some people are forced to suffer and mourn so much more than others. It's also about integrity, responsibility and character – how to maintain virtue – and what that even means – in a world where nobody is truly sane.

It reminds me of the apocalyptic writings of Scripture – the writings that envisage a great shift, an ending to all that we know. These writings are the product of the feeling that things “right now,” are intolerable unless you put them against a larger horizon. It's all very well to “live in the present moment” if you're privileged enough for your present moment to be free of pain, or bondage, or terror. But for humans to live well within confusion and suffering there needs to be a bigger picture that gives meaning to the moment.

To choose to do right requires some vision of what it's going to take for this moment to pass, some sense that the overall unfolding of history is in the hands of Someone who can shape it to a good and just end.

It seems to be hardwired into us that anticipation – even of something terrible – creates connection and community. We bond when we look forward, even toward something we fear. Without a horizon, we become isolated and cynical and somehow less human.

This is where the prophetic and apocalyptic writings of our religion, that we engage with every Advent, are so crucial to our flourishing, and to the perseverance and resilience of all who live in cruel times. The prophetic vision is the imagination of a world where what God wants is fully expressed. And by imagination I don't mean it only exists in our heads. I mean that there is a dimension, a reality that is bigger than this one, where there is genuine wisdom, genuine goodness and peace and fulfilment beyond anything we know in our everyday lives, and it is given to prophets, artists and storytellers to give us glimpses of that realm.

Their imagery opens a window for fresh air to flow into a dense and suffocating room, or echo faintly the melody that's being played by a full orchestra somewhere else. The Day of the Lord envisaged by the prophets is a land of promise – a place we long to go to and feel like we remember in some part of our souls, but that is veiled from our sight and we don't know the path to walk to get there.

True pictures of flourishing are not fantasies, endlessly deferred to a far off future 'happy ever after.' They are visionary truths that are always poised to break in and change the here and now. The prophets speak of a realm beyond the one we usually see and experience, but there are ways of being, ways of living that can make space for that other reality to take shape among us.

Jesus lived with one foot in each realm, breathing the air of both, but his teaching about the kingdom of heaven is utterly practical. Love your enemies, give without expecting in return, work on your relationships

not your wealth, wash the feet of your friends and your betrayers, trust God rather than human power, resist evil but only with non-violence, and don't allow hate to take root in your heart.

To be a person of faith is to be someone who looks forward with longing and hope for the world to be renewed, and allows this vision to shape how we live now. Our Scriptures are full of anticipation for a coming day, a Day of the Lord, when wars and violence will cease, and God's peaceable kingdom will flourish for ever. The promise of that Day fulfilled gives us hope and shapes our actions and our prayers, even while we know that whatever we build now is partial and vulnerable to sabotage.

Where is the mountain of the Lord? It's right here, in this room this morning. It's wherever people go to learn of the ways of God and to put their feet onto true pathways, and sing the songs of the Lord. A house where we greet one another in peace and gather round one table, welcoming our differences and setting aside what divides us.

Where is the judge who will arbitrate between nations and turn weapons of destruction into tools to farm and build and heal? Not in the Whitehouse or the Knesset or the Beehive or Buckingham Palace. Not sitting in any war cabinet or supreme court or corporate boardroom.

No, this judge is living in the hearts of the aid workers, the journalists who witness truthfully to what they have seen, those who work tirelessly to bring together people on either side of ancient conflicts to share their stories, name their fears and find their common humanity. This judge is breathing in the spirits of those who protest injustice, who write letters to release prisoners, who give money to repair hospitals, who don't give up praying for peace. This judge is working tirelessly in the background to expose where corporate money and political greed have come together to make and use tools to kill civilians and turn homes into rubble. And having revealed it, to create alternative pathways for investment that nurture community and creation.

One day, nation shall not lift up sword – or bomb or drone – against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. That Day is not yet here, though we trust its coming and we watch and make ourselves ready. But, on another level that Day is always here. We are people who live with that Day inside us through the spirit of Jesus Christ. We chant its melodies, lighting its candles in the darkness. We paint its pictures on broken walls, and write its story on scarred hands that reach out to heal and hold.

And we do not lose hope, because we know that our longing and our watching and waiting for that better Day is a gift – it's planted in us by God to keep us looking forward and looking around us for signs of God's inbreaking love. The world may seem dark right now, but we know that in the darkness Christ will be born – Christ is always being born. It's a vulnerable hope – as vulnerable as a baby in a refugee family on the run from a tyrant. It's a tentative hope – it doesn't claim certainty about the day or the hour. Perhaps it's a fool's hope. If so, let's faithfully embrace God's foolishness and stay awake to watch expectantly for the dawn.

St John's Royal Oak, 2025
The Reverend Brenda Rockell