

-There is a concept that is well known to many literature and music history scholars which had a profound effect on especially European culture over 19th centuries. It is called *sehnsucht*. It's very hard to translate fully, but it is believed to be a combination of two German words: "sehnen" which means "to long for" and "sucht" which means "anxiety, sickness, or addiction". Now, from a music history standpoint which I find fascinating (Michael McClintock can probably tell you more about it from a literary perspective), *sehnsucht* was a huge influence on almost all composers writing music in what we refer to as the Romantic period. Beethoven, Berlioz, Schubert, Strauss, and Wagner all incorporated this concept in some shape or form. *Sehnsucht*, in a basic sense, is the psychological state where one deeply yearns for completeness and seeks to shed the imperfect in exchange for an alternative experience that usually is unattainable. Usually, in the case of music, this was described in two forms: longing for a lover (which is seen in Schubert's setting of a poem by Georg van Hardenberg titled "sehnsucht nach dem tode" or longing for death where he is longing for his dead fiancée) or longing for the divine (which is seen in many ways in Beethoven's final movement of Symphony #9 Ode to Joy) Because of the unattainable nature of *sehnsucht*, it would lead many characters in operas and literature to come to a bizarre conclusion: if I can't fulfill this longing or desire, I must die (kind of similar to the mindset of Juliet killing herself after the death of Romeo). It turns out this concept so influenced music and culture of the time that people (no joke, from news reports and records) actually ended up committing suicide following symphonies, plays, and operas (in fact, Hector Berlioz wrote an entire symphony, *Symphonie Fantastique*, which is based on him chasing his lover and then his head getting cut off at the end).

-*Sehnsucht*, a longing that at the end has little if any hope.

-Perhaps some of us initially approach these words of Jesus on this first Sunday of Advent, known as the "Little Apocalypse" in the gospel of Mark with a touch of *sehnsucht*. "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light." There is a lot of death and longing in there that doesn't seem to get resolved.

-Apocalyptic literature, especially of ancient Israel, is many times to us something to be feared. Usually filled with weird code language or wild beasts, it is something still quite foreign to us.

-This is because this type of literature was not written for us. Contrary to what many end-of-the-world enthusiasts think, apocalyptic literature was not written to give us secret codes or dates or puzzles. It was written instead, for a very specific group of people in a very specific time.

-All of the gospels were written in a time when it was hard to be a follower of Christ and they each have their own specific contexts. The gospel of Mark, specifically, was written at a time of great upheaval and uncertainty. Following several Jewish revolts, the

Roman Empire was poised to “make an example of Jerusalem”. Around the year 70 AD, they came in with several armies, turning the city (and its sacred Temple) into rubble and killing thousands. We believe the gospel of Mark was written either shortly before or shortly after this terrible event that changed the course of both Judaism and Christianity forever. Thus, Jesus in this section of the gospel is not just talking to his disciples, but specifically talking with the people of Mark’s church community who were living about 40 years following the events of Jesus. In short, this was a time of great suffering, uncertainty, and persecution.

-But what is Jesus saying here? Is he spreading a type of *sehnsucht* with his followers, telling them that if all is not won, it’s not worth living anymore?

- “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.” These are not words of fire and damnation, they are words of hope. In short, Jesus is saying God is still there with you and will act even within great death and destruction. On top of this comes this fascinating word that is used in this particular section 3 times: *gregorete*. It’s translated here as “keep awake” or “keep alert”. *Gre-* is more of an action type adverb “get, or do”. *Gorete* comes from the word *egiro* which literally means “wake up” or “rise”. So, ironically, you could translate this as Jesus saying: “get woke” or “get risen”. This isn’t a passive calling from Christ, but one that I think is meant to compel the people of Mark’s church to “get going”; get up and prepare for your savior is coming. For you can’t see it now, but even in uncertainty and death, there will be peace and love. Your job is to be alert and to continue proclaiming and living.

-Maybe this is where this text can be useful for us. It’s true, most of us do not know what death and persecution feels like (and I’m not talking about the frivolous “Happy Holidays” or “War on Christmas” persecution that we hear every year). But maybe we can relate to the uncertainty, fear, and injustice that the early Christian communities also faced.

-Women around the world are finally able to come out and are highlighting the fact that real equality and respect of gender, especially in the workplace, is still a lie. North Korea continues to make unprecedented moves in firing missiles and testing their nuclear capability (in fact, Hawaii next month will be testing their missile warning sirens for the first time since the cold war). Climate Change continues to show its face in changing weather patterns: droughts, storms, and floods.

-That’s just world and societal uncertainties. Many of us here in this room are facing personal uncertainties right now too: battling cancer or some illness, navigating a divorce, caring for our elderly parents, loss of a job. Lets face it, people are nervous about an uncertain future. But, let’s not make the mistake of seeing this as some

sehnsucht type of “all is lost” kind of way. What this text says to me most clearly is something Pastor Jean Larson has said many times to our text study pastor’s group: “the Spirit is faithful”. The Spirit is faithful. As our Isaiah text says: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” God does not give up on us, even in dark moments. The Spirit is faithful.

-But here is the other thing, how do we “get risen” in this time and place knowing that the Spirit is faithful?

-Maybe it starts with us being ready for opportunities that get us out of the worry box. On Wednesday, I get a text from Joel Carlson saying: “Piper and Emily are doing well are the former was delivered by C section tonight. Happy to have you stop by the hospital if you’re interested.” Now I was having a little of a down day that day, and Abby, well, Abby goes through body uncertainties EVERY day these days: some up some down. I thought: we gotta go meet Piper. So I picked up Abby from work and we headed over to Community hospital where I got to hold this little not even 24 hour old 7 lbs. 7 ounces little girl. That was a real transformative moment for me. Because it took me out of the fear and uncertainty and brought me to a place of peace and hope. “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” Maybe “getting woke” this Advent is less about *doing* and more about *being*: being ready for opportunities to fill us and remind us that God is faithful and present today and every day no matter what.

-May you find a renewed hope of God’s presence this Advent. May we also be able to “get woke” and seek opportunities for new life to enter into a sometimes dark world. Amen.