



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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My Lord, What a Mo(u)rning

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 29, 2020

The First Sunday of Advent

Based on Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Let us pray.

God our deliverer, whose approaching birth still shakes the foundations of our world: may we so wait for your coming with eagerness and hope that we embrace without terror the labor pains of the new age, through Jesus Christ.

Amen.¹

In early 1939, the famous contralto Marian Anderson, having sung in some of the most prominent venues around the globe, sought to serenade a large audience at Constitution Hall in Washington, DC. But Anderson was Black, and the Daughters of the American Revolution, who owned the hall, refused to relax segregation regulations so that she could perform. Incensed by the treatment that Anderson faced, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who had met Anderson four years earlier, resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution, and soon President Franklin Delano Roosevelt approved a replacement concert for Anderson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. On the afternoon of Easter Sunday 1939, an interracial crowd of approximately 75,000 people gathered to hear Anderson sing while hundreds of thousands listened to the live radio broadcast. The concert symbolically challenged the immense injustice of racial segregation on a big national stage, paving the way for the even more dramatic challenges to come. When Anderson chronicled these events eighteen years later in an autobiography, she titled her book *My Lord, What A Morning*.

In Anderson's haunting rendition of the spiritual that gave her autobiography its name, you can hear both the stinging sadness of a woman who has known horrific prejudice and the sturdy hope of a trailblazer who has witnessed barriers begin to break down.² You can hear, too, the plaintive pleas of Anderson's enslaved ancestors who had composed the spiritual in the first place: their deep sorrow at the dehumanizing oppression they continually faced, as well as their defiant confidence that, despite all the odds, the stars would eventually fall, that there would ultimately be a reckoning, that things would be different someday.

Scholars tell us that the fifth word of this classic spiritual—mo(u)rning—can be validly interpreted in two very different ways. The first interpretation—the one that is more commonly adopted by modern hymnals and modern audiences—hears mo(u)rning as M-O-R-N-I-N-G, the beginning of a new day. In this interpretation, the stars falling from heaven are signs that we should welcome of a universe that is changing for the better. The second interpretation—one that is less common in modern contexts but has historical precedent—hears mo(u)rning as M-O-U-R-N-I-N-G, an emotional outpouring of grief. In this

¹ Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, 23.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJoDR704-BA>.

interpretation, the stars falling from heaven are signs that we should lament of a universe changing for the worse.

Scripture supports both of these interpretations. Matthew's version of today's passage from Mark explicitly declares that all the tribes of the earth will mourn (M-O-U-R-N) as the stars fall down from heaven, but all three Synoptic Gospels use metaphors of waking and wakefulness in conjunction with Christ's coming, and the Hebrew prophets routinely refer to a dramatic reckoning as "the day of the Lord."³ The other sections of the spiritual also substantiate both spellings: the version we sang today contains images of waking and of crying, while the version Marian Anderson sang decades ago imagines leaving behind the old life of the world to experience the new life of heaven. Further support for both interpretations can be found in other spirituals, which encourage singers to "mourn and never tire" as they approach the "great camp meeting in the Promised Land" but elsewhere call the Last Judgment a "great getting up morning."⁴ Finally, the two oldest collections that contain "My Lord What a Mo(u)rning"—collections that were published in the nineteenth century within one year of each other—don't agree on how that fifth word should be spelled, and, because the spiritual was composed and initially transmitted orally, there's no more original source to which we can turn.⁵

Perhaps, then, this great dilemma is not one that we are supposed to solve. "This text seems always to have been attended by a dual understanding of that homonym at the fifth word," hymnologist Carl Daw writes. "Ultimately, the two spellings describe different sides of the same coin. The redeemed will rejoice on the day of the general resurrection, the 'great getting-up morning'...and those who are not redeemed will weep. However this debated word is spelled, the larger truth is that Christ's coming in glory will be one involving the whole creation that is being made new."⁶ Hymnologist Michael Hawn adds his supposition that "the original singers who learned the song without a printed text may have embraced this homophonous coincidence."⁷

But how could those original singers have accepted an understanding of "mo(u)rning" that incorporated both morning (M-O-R-N-I-N-G) and mourning (M-O-U-R-N-I-N-G)? Why would they have wanted to amalgamate the hope of a new day and the sorrow of an intensely felt loss? The enslaved people who so brilliantly and touchingly reflected on Scripture in their music understood, I think, that God's arrival on earth is the occasion for both wailing and joy, and that neither wailing nor joy can exist without the other. The pregnant woman persists through the pain of labor to deliver her child; the artist struggles through the creative process to give birth to a new work. Similarly, Christ's coming—ultimately a great blessing for all of creation—requires massive upheaval, a tremendous disruption of the status quo that precipitates agony as well as promise. One's experience of such a reckoning will depend heavily on how much one stands to lose. Falling stars and trembling heavens are far more appealing to those who possess little in the present arrangement of the universe; for them, the temporary pain of short-term destruction is clearly outweighed by the potential of a better long-term future on the other end. For those who benefit from how the universe is currently structured, however, the reality is very different; upheaval could eradicate their power. Those who like the way things are see the apocalypse as something to grieve; those who yearn for something more see the apocalypse as something to cheer wildly.

I hardly have to tell you that we live in apocalyptic times. A deadly disease ravages the earth; the line between truth and falsehood is eroding; divisions between groups of people are stark—and many of these groups, though they hail from a variety of political backgrounds, similarly call for drastic upheavals. It is

³ Matthew 24:30. See also Matthew 24:42-44, Mark 13:32-37 and Luke 12:37, as well as Amos 5:18 and Joel 2:1.

⁴ "Walk Together, Children" and "Fare Ye Well," respectively.

⁵ Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion*, 358.

⁶ Daw, 358.

⁷ C. Michael Hawn, "History of Hymns: 'My Lord What a Morning'" <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-my-lord-what-a-morning>.

easy to poke holes in the theories of apocalyptic prophets—to uncover their flaws, to illuminate their misunderstandings, to highlight their hypocrisies. Apocalyptic figures have always been naïve and overly idealistic—they have always dangled at the edge of sanity—and apocalyptic ideas have always been abused and manipulated for nefarious purposes. But I am less interested this morning in those of us who desire a fundamental change and more interested in those of us who don't—those of us who are not drawn in the slightest towards a drastic upheaval; those of us who find all of this talk about apocalypse unenlightened and unseemly. Why do we shy away from a final reckoning? What is it that we are afraid of? What makes us so sure that falling stars and shaking heavens portend disaster and not joy? What do we stand to lose? The answers to these questions, I suspect, will take us to the heart of the meaning of Advent and to the heart of the moment in which we find ourselves.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

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