

1st Sunday of Advent (Year C)

Luke 21:25-36

‘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.’

Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.’

‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not 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.’

So I began my day recently, as I often do, by listening to NPR in the car on my way to wherever I happened to be going that day. On this particular day was one of my favorite shows called “On Point” with Christa Tippett. She was interviewing the British-born essayist and novelist, Pico Iyer, who has long resided in Japan with his wife and has been friends with the current Dalai Lama for some time now.

The topic of the interview was the “Urgency of Slowing Down.” In it, Pico Iyer described giving up his busy life oscillating between Los Angeles and New York City for a much more quiet, introspective life in rural Japan. He now lives in an almost technology-free home and greets each day with the knowledge that he can take walks, read, write, play ping-pong, and just...exist. Sounds kind of nice, doesn’t it? And perhaps scary, too?

As the interview continued, Iyer brought up the “crisis of distraction” that is so prevalent for many of us. We have these technological devices these days that are meant to save us time and energy and yet, ironically, the byproduct of their overuse is that we can be left with less time and even less energy to spend it. In fact, Iyer said that the proof that this is true is that what many of us find even more luxurious nowadays than money or materialistic things is simply a block of free time on the calendar where we have absolutely *nothing* to do!¹

He then goes on to say something so simple and yet profound: *“We got onto this accelerating roller coaster that we never quite asked to get on, and we don’t know how to get off. My keenest sense is that our devices are not going to go away, nor would we want them to. They’ve made our lives so much brighter and*

¹<https://onbeing.org/programs/pico-iyer-the-urgency-of-slowness-nov2018/>

healthier and longer. But it's a safe bet that they're only going to accelerate and proliferate. We're really going to have to take emergency measures just to keep ourselves in proportion and in balance. I sometimes think that travel is how I get my excitement and stimulation, but stillness is how I keep myself sane. Pascal, wonderfully, in the 17th century, said, our problem is distraction. But we try to distract ourselves from distractions, so we get even worse in this vicious cycle.

So the only cure for distraction is attention. I go to my monastery and I go to Japan because they are cathedrals of attention. They're places where people are very attentive and where people like me can try to learn attention."

Learning attention. *That* is the pre-imminent spiritual discipline of our time. The art of paying attention is not something that can be purchased with money or found on a store shelf. Mindfulness is not something that can be taken in pill-form. Being present in the moment is something that is, first and foremost, a *practice* (i.e. something we have to do over and over again to do it better).

There are many passages in the gospels where Jesus implores his followers to pay attention. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus chided his disciples for falling asleep after telling them to stay awake. Matthew 24 has Jesus saying: "Therefore keep watch, for you know not the hour the Lord is coming."

And in today's passage, the first gospel passage of Year C in the lectionary, Jesus again tells us to keep our lamps trimmed and burning.

There will be signs he says, you could call them distractions if you want. There will be distress among the nations and people will be confused and faint from fear. Some will say that God is coming and, when others are filled with fear, Jesus tells his disciples to have a different reaction: hope. Hope because what is drawing near is not destruction but redemption.

Our "theme" for this Season of Advent is "Draw Near," as you'll see the graphic on the front of your bulletin. It comes to us from our friends at "A Sanctified Art" that gave us the designs for the Advent banners and coloring sheets that are behind you and the Advent devotionals that many of you will pick up today. The phrase, "Draw Near" also appears in today's lectionary passage from Luke.

We begin the Season of Advent by proclaiming, with hope, the good news that God is drawing near. Jesus tells us that God is drawing near by pointing to a fig tree. Now, Jesus has a somewhat complex relationship with fig trees in the gospels. Elsewhere in the narratives, Jesus gets a little peckish and gets a hankerin' for a fig. He comes across a fig tree and notices that it is barren. Therefore, Jesus curses the fig tree and makes it so that it will never bear fruit again. So, when someone asks you "what would Jesus do?", remember to tell them that cursing a plant is on the table.

Fortunately, the fig tree is today's story from Luke's gospel fares much better than the other one. Jesus points to a fig tree and says the following: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."

Now, it is rather odd to be speaking about a fig tree in summer at the time that all of the deciduous trees around us have pretty much shed all of their leaves. Nevertheless, Jesus tells his disciples that fruitfulness is

coming and therefore, in the context of Advent, we share the hope that fruitfulness is soon to come to us in the form of a fleshly human being who, coincidentally, is also completely God.

And that is why the Christ-child, Emmanuel, God-With-Us, gives us such hope. Because God is drawing near to us and, because of that joyful truth, we can draw near to one another.

But drawing near to one another takes intentionality. God did not just happen to give us God's only child simply because God had nothing better to do. Rather, God sent us Jesus Christ because God wanted to draw near to us with intentionality. And, to do something intentional means paying attention and being present.

And, therefore, it should come as no surprise that today's passage finishes with two commands: to be on guard and to be alert.

We are called, in this Season of Advent, to be on guard and alert not out of some sense of paranoia but instead out of hopeful anticipation for what God is doing in the world.

So, friends, as we begin this Season of Advent, be on guard. Be alert. Look for the fig tree. Find the places in your life and in the world around you where, even amid the dismal gray background of winter, God is sprouting. Find some time to sit in silence or stillness or whatever space you need in order to clear away the distractions and re-center yourself upon the grace of the coming Christ-child. Take a walk with your family or do a "gratitude check" at the dinner table. Play a game with each other and put the phones away. Sign up to get one, or all, of our Advent coloring pages and take some time to color and turn off the cacophony of the world if only for a little bit. Take some intentionality and take 20 minutes out of your day to stop and do your Advent devotional. I promise, for those 20 minutes, the world will go on without you. Be present. And be alert.

Look for the fig tree, friends, for hope is sprouting.

In the name of the Christ-child, Emmanuel. Amen.