



ANXIETY WITHOUT URGENCY

December 2, 2018, First Sunday in Advent

Luke 21: 25-36

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“You are on a rooftop, looking across empty air, 1,350 feet above the ground. Your foot dangles over the ledge and touches a steel cable just centimeters wide. As you shift your body forward, hands gripped tight around a balancing pole, you find yourself suspended over a gut-wrenching void.”¹ A description of walking on a tightrope between the Twin Towers, or maybe an alternative version of our scripture lesson this morning?

If you want to get in the mood for Christmas perhaps it is best if you do not come to church on the first Sunday morning in Advent. Did you hear that text Christopher just read from the assigned lectionary? Roaring seas, fainting and foreboding, praying that we escape all these things that will take place. Perhaps it would be better to wait until this evening when we will gather on Park Avenue and we can get lost in “decking the halls” and “fa la la la las.”

But since you are all already here, we might as well see what we can salvage from the morning. It is important to understand that texts like this, and the book of Revelation and other tales of the apocalypse, are not describing a photograph of the future but rather are an impressionistic representation of our current reality as it is unfolding. Apocalyptic literature is a funhouse mirror that reflects a strikingly distorted image of our lives and, in doing so, reveals a deeper truth. Apocalyptic literature is written to function as a gulp of espresso, a shot of adrenaline, a bracing slap across the face. Wake up, there is something important for you to see here!

Our text from Luke opens with cosmic images of the entire universe, the sun and moon and stars are all in play. What is occurring affects everything that exists. Then we hear a parable about a fig tree, a common element in the lives of the original listeners. The scope of the picture has narrowed from the entire universe to our immediate neighborhood. And then it shifts again, as the text speaks of the worries of our individual lives, the focus has attenuated down to each one of us. So whatever is happening is affecting absolutely everything, specifically you and me.

So, we have learned of both the vast scope and the personal specificity of this dramatic in-breaking into our reality. But of course that begs the question of what exactly is on the way that is both so universal and so personal. It would be easy to get caught up in all of the fear and foreboding and roaring waves language at the beginning of this text and be anxious over what is arriving but that would be a mistake. In this text Luke uses the word “near” three times to let us know just how close this all is. And listen to what is drawing so close to us, “your redemption is drawing near,” “summer is already near,” “the kingdom of God is near.”

Redemption, and the lush growth of summer, and the kingdom of God, are all images of Jesus Christ. And while there may, in fact indeed there are, things to be feared in the surrounding chaos, there is no fear to be found in the arrival of the Son of God. The divine is ever arriving in our midst but the divine particularly arrives when we find ourselves in the midst of darkness and chaos.

As we begin this advent season we are called to open ourselves up to recognizing this arrival, this in-breaking of God’s presence in our midst. At first thought, we might think it is easier to recognize the presence of God in the best and brightest of everything, in the joyful moments of this season. And of course we do that. But there is also a reason we celebrate Advent and Christmas in this time of year. There is not a whole lot of daylight in December. As we all know, the shortest day of the year, sunrise to sunset, is December 21st, the winter solstice. It is in the midst of this gathering darkness that we are most in search of some illumination, most in need of the light the candles of advent provide.

This is a text that both shows us the darkness that can envelop this world and ourselves, and the promise of the approaching light. And in doing so it presents us with a choice and questions that each of us needs to answer. Will we allow our focus to be consumed by the darker realities of our world and find ourselves in a position of recoiling from the world? Or, will we allow ourselves to focus upon the one who is ever drawing nearer? Will we have a posture that is hunched over in defeat to the burdens of this life? Or, will we, as the text says, “stand up and raise our heads” that we may recognize all of the ways the divine presence is in-breaking into our world? Will we stand up straight and have our eyes focused upon the horizon for God’s miraculous presence in our midst?

Shortly before his death from pancreatic cancer at 59, the British playwright Dennis Potter described the exaltation of looking out his window at a blossom that had become in his words the “whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be.” He told an interviewer from *The New York Times*, “Things are both more trivial and more important than they ever were, and the difference between the trivial and the important doesn’t seem to matter. But the newness of everything is absolutely wondrous.”²

Now, I do not know if Dennis Potter was a man of any faith. But in his vivid description of that blossom I hear a man who, although he was facing his own death, was completely awake and alive and present to the miracle of the existence God has created for us. The Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel wrote, “Indifference to the sublime wonder of being is the root of sin.”

Advent is a season of preparation and watchfulness. Advent is a call to perceptiveness. Advent is a summons to recognize God’s immanent presence. Advent is a season challenging us to be completely alive and awake to the movement of the Spirit in the moment.

But Advent is not about anxiety, or angst or apprehension. I am an inherently neurotic person. The idea of being both intensely prepared and watchful and yet not anxious sounds akin to simultaneously juggling bowling balls and feathers.

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

Advent is inviting us to a sense of urgency without anxiety. Advent is inviting us to walk down a path that may appear to some of us as a tightrope. Sonja Harpstead, a tightrope instructor at Circus Warehouse in New York City, says this about tightrope walking, “Posture is the absolute most important thing.”³

We all know the infamous phrase that is said to everyone who is afraid of heights, “Don’t look down.” Focusing the majority of our energy and attention on our fears and frustrations is just like someone afraid of heights hyperventilating as they stare down over the edge of a cliff. Looking down is not the answer. And closing our eyes and trying to ignore the drop before us only causes us to be trapped alone with our fear. We all know that the answer is to keep our eyes open and lift our heads and look out toward the horizon.

Our text from Luke acknowledges this reality. After vividly describing all of the roaring and fear and foreboding in the world, Jesus instructs us “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

If we close our eyes and bury our heads to all of the fears and frustrations of this world, we may blot out some small part of them but we are left numb and alone. If we stare intently and solely upon our fears, our vision is blocked from all else that surrounds us. And this numbness and aloneness and lack of vision keep us from receiving and recognizing God’s movement in the world and in our lives. Thomas John Carlisle wrote, “God’s dream and destination is a day when all flesh in all places is sensitive, receptive, welcoming to torrents, freshets, cataracts, floods and deluges and inundations of the Spirit.” We can only be receptive to God’s Holy Spirit if, even as we find ourselves on the tightrope of our lives, we open our eyes, lift up our head, and look to the horizon.

Advent, in all of its hustle and bustle madness, is a season calling us to a posture that looks to the horizon with hopefulness watching for God’s movement.

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Even in the midst of our challenges there is no need for anxiety, it is God who is in charge. It is God who has reigned, who does reign, who will reign forever triumphant. The only mistake we can make is not keeping our eyes peeled for how God is at work, and missing the “absolutely wondrous,” “whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossoms.” Being completely open to the world and all that surrounds us is no easy task. But it is impossible until we open our eyes, lift our heads, look to the horizon and take the first step.

In 1974, French high-wire artist Philippe Petit crossed between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. In the PBS series “American Experience,” he said this about the crossing. “After a few steps, I knew I was in my element and I knew the wire was not well rigged (we had some tremendous problem during the whole night of rigging) but it was safe enough for me to carry on...And then, very slowly as I walked, I was overwhelmed by a sense of easiness, a sense of simplicity.” 4

Our lives are not perfect. The riggings beneath us will sway at times. But our destination in the one who is coming is secure. So let us look beyond our fears and toward our future. Welcome to the call and challenge of Advent.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1, 3 and 4 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-happens-your-body-when-you-walk-tightrope>

2 Rachel Clarke, “In Life’s Last Moments, Open a Window,” *Sunday Review, The New York Times*, September 9, 2018.