

December 2, 2018 First Sunday of Advent
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GOSPEL

Luke 21:25-36

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the twenty-first chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus said:] ²⁵“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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴“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, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be 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.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

Today Advent begins...with a call from Jesus to keep alert. To be on the lookout.

We talk about Advent as a time of preparation...and I know lots of us are neck deep in preparing...but today, Jesus isn't really talking about getting ready in a decorating-shopping-cleaning-scheduling kind of way. In fact, Jesus' words today have such foreboding it makes Advent feel more like doing a lookout shift in the crow's nest of the Titanic...than finishing a to-do list.

His instructions today actually remind me of another teacher...albeit a fictional one...Mad-Eye Moody...of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...in the world of Harry Potter. I have a fondness for Mad-Eye. He's a bit of a misfit...he's rough around the edges. And...I suppose I feel a certain kind of warmth for him like I do for almost all

characters in fiction who have lost an eye, like I have. If only I'd been a wizard maybe I could have gotten a much cooler and infinitely more magical fake eye than the one I have. Though I think my prosthetic eye is pretty magical, in its own way, too...but maybe that's a topic for another day.

Today, I am reminded of Moody's barked refrain to all his students...who we was teaching to defend themselves from dark magic:

"Constant vigilance!" he would yell... "Constant vigilance."

Jesus is giving a similar order today...to look for the signs...the troubling...tumultuous signs...of change...and of the kingdom of God coming near.

On the one hand, he seems to suggest this is simple enough to do...just like you know spring is coming when the fig tree sprouts. When you see signs of great troubles – in nature...and among the nations...then you will know redemption is close at hand.

But...that formula...is...well...it's not so clear as Jesus makes it sound. My feelings about this are sort of the same as my feelings from animal dissections in biology class. It all looked very clear on the drawing in the book...but once you are inside an actual animal...it's all just a tangle of squishy stuff in there that smells bad...and I don't really have any idea how to identify a nerve ganglion in all that mess...thank you very much. The picture was a lie.

Read the signs, Jesus? Natural disasters? Unrest among nations? Well, just this week, there have been earthquakes...mounting tensions between Russia and Ukraine...and ongoing horrors in Yemen. But it that just our run-of-the-mill tragedy and suffering? Or are we too numb? Will we truly know these trials when we see and feel them, as Jesus suggests? Are we seeing and feeling them now? Have people been asking themselves that question every year since he said those things almost two thousand years ago?

I don't think we often know where or how to look for the kingdom that is coming. God keeps showing up in places we don't expect or can hardly seem to find. Which reminds me of yet another fictional story universe...this one of the Disney persuasion...

There's a moment in the movie Moana, when the young woman Moana has been lead down into a place called Lalota, the Realm of the Monsters. There's a giant jewel-encrusted crab there, Tamatoa, who tries to trap her...and as he approaches and looms over her, he says, "You can't run from me!" in a menacing voice...but...Moana just turns around and does exactly that. And then Tamatoa, says, "Oh, you can. You keep surprising me!"

Like the goofy giant crab...there are so many things we think are impossible...unreasonable...and God keeps surprising us...by showing up in unexpected places...in unexpected people.

One of my colleagues shared a story last week about how their small town had put up a nativity in a public park immediately after Thanksgiving. Separation-of-church-and-state questions aside...someone whose motivation remains unknown...apparently stole the baby Jesus from the scene almost immediately.

Now, personally...I think they could just be a stickler for the liturgical season...and didn't think Jesus should be there yet...because it wasn't even Advent yet, after all...but I suppose it could have been someone more mean-spirited than that. The fact of the matter is, though, that town's experience is probably closer to the reality of the Christmas story than what we tend to do year after year.

Because, in reality, Jesus rarely stays where we put him. He would not be willing to hang out in a box in a municipal storage shed for ten and a half months of the year.

So...in a time so filled with preparations...what does it look like to be on watch...the way Jesus tells us to today? To be putting out the manger and the decorations...all just so...realizing all the while...that Jesus has no intentions of showing up in domesticated serenity...exactly where and how we want or plan?

The Listening Team helping lead our congregation's Missional River process has been thinking about this...about the spiritual discipline of entering into conversations with each other and our neighbors without narrowing the scope of our expectations so much that we miss what is outside our preconceived ideas...because that is almost always where God is leading us...

This is a spiritual practice that we often seem to need. Learning to really listen...to really look...for what we truly don't yet know...and can't imagine...is out there.

Yesterday was World AIDS Day...and so many of us have missed the chance to see Christ's love present in the community that suffered from and cared for each other through the worst chapters of that epidemic in our country.

Are we ready now to see Christ present in those who are imprisoned...like the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul were during their ministries? And as Jesus himself was at the end of his life?

Are we ready to believe that God can bring new life from dead ends...like the stump of Jesse...who had been the father of a king...of David...a glorious and painfully human ruler...and whose family line also included people like Ruth...an immigrant and widow, who became a part of the people of God...and of a royal lineage...but who had faded into unimportance as time passed...?

Can our preparations happen with the kind of watchfulness that allows us to be surprised, redirected, and even disrupted in our well-laid plans? Because Jesus isn't telling us to make a list and check it twice. He's telling us to keep our attention on what is coming...on what we haven't even thought to put on a list...because it's not what *we* will be doing...it's what *God* will be doing in these holy days.

Because God is getting ready to do things we can only begin to imagine. I hope you can keep watch for those things! Because in them we will truly discover the Advent of God.

Amen.