

1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13

Luke 21: 25-36

“To know the dark, go dark, go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings.”

-- Wendell Berry

I don't have to tell you that the pandemic has manufactured trauma at an astonishing clip. Throughout the epidemic, millions of Americans have suffered devastating emotional stress even if they've never gotten sick: watching a loved one die, losing a job, going to work in life-threatening conditions, cajoling a twelve-year-old to endure yet another day in a Zoom classroom, or bearing the brunt of racial and political unrest. After 20 months of being overwhelmed by grief, anxiety, isolation, and rolling trauma, many have recovered uneventfully. But for others, the quiet moments after adrenaline fades and normalcy resumes can be unexpectedly punishing. When they finally get a chance to exhale, their breaths often emerge as sighs. If you've been swimming furiously for over a year-and-half, you don't expect to finally reach dry land and feel like you're drowning.

In a poignant spiritual autobiography, *In the Shelter*, Irish poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama asks a question I've been thinking about as Advent circled closer and closer. “How do we say hello to here?” That is, how do we live honestly in our own skins when we are whip-sawn between the ecstasy of pandemic vaccine protection and the agony of a deadly fourth wave of this soul-crunching pandemic? Or to put it in terms of this season, how do we stare through the gathering darkness to catch a glimpse of a bright shining star of an infant's birth? “How do we say hello to here?” How do we guard against the oversupply of numbness, denial, and despair? In his opening chapter, Ó Tuama describes the test we face right now: “Much of our desire to not-name a place is because we fear that in naming it we are giving it power, and by giving it power we are saying we may not escape. It's a valid fear. There are some suburbs of hell that we wish we'd never visited. . . . To name something can be to call it into being, and we do not wish to call certain things into any kind of being.”¹

In our Gospel reading for this first week of Advent, Jesus challenges us to name and welcome the “here,” even when the “here” is hazardous. In language that sounds alarmingly current, Jesus describes a world whirring in pain. Roaring, rising seas, distress among nations, people collapsing in fear. How do we accept the “here” that's in front of us? “When you see these things,” Jesus says, don't turn away. Don't hide. Why? Because it's only when we embrace reality — when we acknowledge and welcome the “here” of human suffering — that we experience the nearness of God.

¹ Pádraig Ó Tuama, *In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World*, (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2015), p. 21

In these shortening days when we are only an inch away from the winter solstice and the darkness and chaos can be overwhelming, I have to pause and remind myself that darkness does not come from a different place than light; it is not presided over by a different God. The long nights of Advent and the early mornings of Easter both point us toward the God for whom darkness and light are alike.

I didn't grow up observing Advent, mostly because I was not part of any church until my teens. Then the most formative church in my faith journey didn't follow the liturgical calendar, so the holiday schedule I remember went straight from Thanksgiving turkeys and pumpkin pies to Christmas trees and "Silent Night" — one gorging, shopping frenzy crashing hard into the next. But as I've moved deeper into the liturgical practices, I have come to love the holy season we're now entering. I love that the Church begins its new year when the days are growing darker. I love that Advent rejects thin sentimentality and false cheer. And I love that the Gospel gets us started this week with images — not of swaddling clothes, twinkly stars, and fleecy lambs — but of the world as it really is, here and now. Gorgeous, dark, fragile, and falling apart.

A favorite novelist Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures."² That's precisely what Jesus does in his farsighted wake-up call in Luke. He shouts, he draws oversized, astonishing figures, and he uses every stylistic device at his disposal to snap his listeners to attention. "Be on guard," he warns his disciples. "Be alert." "Stand up and raise your heads." "Look."

Our very un-Christmasy apocalyptic Luke 21:25-36 places Jesus on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the holy city of Jerusalem that will be his doom and glory. What exactly does Jesus envision? The tumultuous end of life as we know it? The destruction of Jerusalem? Throughout this story, Jesus describes a collection of what Joseph Fitzmyer dubs "apocalyptic stage props,"³ signals that we are into bizarre, poetic, symbolic territory far beyond the realm of the doable, the practical, the historical. I wonder if we experience some of these emotions -- the confusion and distress, despair, the overwhelming, when we are beset directly with "the roaring of seas and waves," dangerous climate issues, massive injustice, and life-threatening weather events.

These apocalyptic themes from Luke recall Vincent van Gogh's famous painting, "The Starry Night." (The very same image that is printed on the cover of your bulletin today. I invite you to take a look!) Hailing from a line of Dutch Reformed pastors, van Gogh's Impressionist painting is packed with dramatic, thought provoking images of swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep blue and black. There is a yellow moon and bright stars, described by one art critic as "rockets of burning yellow." In the background is a small town with a prominent church steeple. In the foreground is a foreboding flame-like image that connects earth and sky. Art historians take it to be a cypress tree, which in would have been associated with death and immortality. This famous painting elicits wildly different responses from viewers. Some see it as a daunting image of a frightening sky. Others are drawn to it as something bold and beautiful, even giving us a glimpse of God. Like van Gogh's

² Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Sally Fitzgerald, editor. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1970)

³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (The Anchor Bible, Vol. 28A, 1985, reprinted 2001, Abingdon Press, Nashville)

great painting, Luke's apocalypse elicits different reactions, and this is the invitation to what Jesus offers on this First Sunday of Advent.

You might love, or you might tremble at Jesus' courage, and encouragement: "When these things happen" – so terrifying to the world – "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." We are those who need not cower. We can embrace trauma and hardship and horrifying uncertainty, because we know God's "got the whole world in his hands." The 'redemption' that is promised is not a private lifeboat to save a few privileged folk while everything else is destroyed. Rather, our redemption is equated with the coming of God's reign, which spells transformation, healing, and wholeness for all of life.

The cartoonist and theologian Charles Schultz helps put this matter into perspective. One comic strip features Peppermint Patty and her friend Marcie, who is apt to refer to Peppermint Patty as "Sir." Well, one-day Peppermint Patty is in great inner turmoil with the fear that the world is about to come an abrupt and violent end, that her young life will be over, and that the apocalypse is becoming real. She turns to Marcie and asks in a trembling voice, "What if the world ends tonight?" Marcie, without missing a beat responds, "I promise there will be a tomorrow, Sir. In fact, it is already tomorrow in Australia."

It is already tomorrow—is an expression of how and where hope is here, now, in the first days, hours, of Advent. The church father Tertullian put it this way: "The kingdom of God . . . is beginning to be at hand; the reward of life, and the rejoicing of eternal salvation, and the perpetual gladness and possession lately lost of paradise, are now coming, with the passing away of the world; already heavenly things are taking the place of earthly, and great things of small, and eternal things of things that fade away. What room is there here for anxiety and solicitude?"⁴

If we are honest, the Gospels, and especially Luke, fail to provide us soothing, syrupy Advent invitations we like to accept as we shop for gifts, decorate Christmas trees, sing carols and imagine perfect family gatherings. But as Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge reminds us, "Advent begins in the dark. It is not a season for the faint of heart." Whether we like it or not, the invitations Advent offers us are hard-edged; they don't look pretty on greeting cards. But they are indispensable and life-giving, nevertheless. They help us say hello to "here" and to the reality of these days. They help us find redemption in the most startling places. Along with writer Debi Thomas, here are some of the Advent invitations⁵ I'm reflecting on this week:

⁴ Tertullian, *The Treatises*, 7: On the Mortality in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 5, pp. 64, 69.

⁵ Debi Thomas, *Journeys with Jesus*, When You See These Things, Sunday December 2, 2018

1. *The invitation to yearn.* That is, to name the “here” of our desires without shame or reservation. Advent is the season when longing makes sense. When it’s okay to say we are hungry, thirsty, lonely, empty, unfinished, or unhoused. In Advent, we *want*, and we want fiercely. We sit in darkness, longing for light. We sit in exile, longing for home. We sit with aching, empty arms, waiting to cradle a life that’s still unformed, still hidden, still in process. In Advent, our desire for God strains towards God’s desire for us. Between the clinging and the yearning, we are unmade, remade, and unmade again.
2. *The invitation to notice.* To attend. To look. “*Look* at the fig tree,” Jesus says. “Look at *all* the trees.” Be attentive to the details. Don’t theologize, don’t revel in abstraction, don’t assume that God is present only in creed, theory, sermon, hymn and doctrine. Look at the sprouting leaves. Notice the changing sky. Attend to the enormous movements of the oceans and great lakes — and the small shifts of your soul and spirit. The God who shows up in a teenager’s womb might show up anywhere. Likewise, the God who trusted God’s very own self, totally and completely, and in full bodily form, to the care of a woman. Pay attention. God is drawing near.
3. *The invitation to wait.* During Advent, we live with quiet anticipation in the “not yet.” This is no easy task in the modern world, which approves entrances, finish lines, shortcuts, and end products, far more than it does the twisty journey. Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson called the Christian life “a long obedience in the same direction,”⁶ and I don’t think we can get more descriptive than that. If the material world speeds past darkness to light, then Advent reminds us that necessary things — things worth waiting for — happen in the dark. Next spring’s seeds crack open in cold winter earth. God’s Spirit hovers over murky waters, preparing to create new worlds. The child we wait for grows in the deep darkness of the womb. In Advent, “Our food is expectation,” writes Nora Gallagher,⁷ a season when we attempt to find not perfection, but possibility.

So. How do we say hello to “here?” We begin, Pádraig Ó Tuama writes, by admitting that “the rotten fruit of illusion rarely fills for long.” Advent is an antidote to illusion. It cuts to the chase. It insists on the truth. It lays us bare. Advent invites us to dwell richly in the here, precisely because *here* is where God dwells when the oceans heave, the ground shakes, and our hearts are gripped by fear. “When you see these things,” Jesus says, hope fiercely and live truthfully.

⁶ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience In the Same Direction*, (InterVarsity Press, DownersGrove, Illinois, 2003).

⁷Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith*, (Vintage Press, New York, 1999), p. 28.

Deep in the gathering dark, something tender continues to grow. Yearn for it, wait for it, notice it, imagine it. Something beautiful — something for the world's saving — waits to be born.

Listen to the long stillness

New life is stirring

New dreams are on the wing

New hopes are being readied:

Humankind is fashioning a new heart

Humankind is forging a new mind

God is at work. This is the season of Promise.⁸

-The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, Theologian and Civil Rights Leader

⁸ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press; Reprint edition, November 1996, Boston.