

Keep Awake

November 30, 2008 | First Sunday of Advent (Year B)

Lectionary citations

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that he is near, right at the door. (Mark 13:28-29)

When I was up in St. Louis this past week, I was lucky to have the time to walk the trails of one of my favorite parks, Queeny Park. As I walked through the wood, I marveled at the strong tall trees now bare of leaves, which made a thick blanket over the trail. I have walked through those woods in each season. In this season, the woods seem smaller because you can see right through them to the other side. At the same time, you can see the trunks and branches of the trees more clearly and appreciate the different textures of the bark and individual way each tree has grown according to its environment and history. Even the feel of walking through the woods is different as each step comes down on the carpet of leaves. The sounds are different also—a couple of squirrels make a tremendous noise as they crash through the leaves. Even the sun is different, low in the sky for the time of day, but with the leaves gone, its warmth and light shines through every corner of the woods.

There is something sad about this leafless season, but also something very beautiful. One of the beauties of living in Missouri is that we have distinct seasons. These seasons are marked not just by patterns of temperature and precipitation, but also by the changes in our trees and plants. As I looked around the woods, I tried to imagine what our leafless winter woods might seem like to a person from a country without seasons. They might be frightened or concerned, thinking that the trees and other plants were sick and dying. They might ask us, “Why don’t you do something to fix this ecological disaster?” I think that part of the reason that we can enjoy winter is that we know that it will end. In just a few months, shoot will come up out of the ground and the trees will put forth tiny buds along their branches, and the woods will explode with green and color.

Advent commemorates the time between the first and second comings of Christ. Advent reminds us that we live in the time between the first coming of Christ—the incarnation, and the second coming—our resurrection. In Advent we prepare ourselves for Christmas—the day “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” It is easy to feel that Jesus “made his dwelling among us” for such a short time before he returned to his father. When he was with us, we saw “his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” We want so badly to see his glory again,

face to face. Yet we live in this between times, a time when we are challenged to see his glory not with our worldly eyes, but with our hearts and minds and spirits.

Like winter, this between times can seem bare and bleak. Yet like winter, the between time has its own special joys and beauties. The leaves have fallen, so the evergreen trees now come into their own. Snow is inconvenient, but it is also very beautiful. Christ has ascended to the right hand of the father, but he has left the Holy Spirit with us, to give life to his body, the Church. The between times are part of God's plan for his people. They are time of testing but also a time of joyful anticipation. From my point of view, a life without seasons would have something missing. Others may disagree, but I feel that winter gives value to summer. Every season of the year has its beginning and ending. This reminds us that life also is a passing season, and every time of life, no matter how beautiful or ugly it is, will also pass away.

As we have come into Advent, we have had a series of readings that bring our attention to the second coming of Christ, the end of days when he will come again in glory. The images in this scripture have pointed out that that time will inevitably come, that it will be a time of change as the old heaven and earth come to an end and the new heaven and earth are born, and that the wise will be always prepared for that day. Although the time and day will not be disclosed, we are warned to look for signs of the final days. Some of these images are frightening, as they should be. However, today's Gospel gives us the beautiful and comforting image of the fig tree giving one of the first signs of spring, as its "twigs get tender."

This made me think of looking for signs of Christ coming in all the signs of new life and love that we see around us. It is not just "war and rumors of war" that tell us Christ is coming, but the tender twigs of the fig tree. Maybe we should focus on the signs of spring in our lives to see that Christ and his Kingdom is near. Signs like our wonderful community thanksgiving service, our successful fellowship dinners and other events, our welcome to visitors, our support for the Jamaican Christian Medical Mission and so many other missions, the pies the 4-H club cooked in our ovens to give away, the efforts of our talented and good-hearted young people we see here today in our "Hanging of the Greens," and all the other signs that this is a vital and active congregation in the body of Christ.

The strongest sign of Christ's coming is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our congregation and our lives. This Advent let us open our eyes to the signs of Christ in the tender twigs and buds in our lives and neighbors. Let us nurture, protect, and value all the signs that Christ is breaking through in our lives, just as inevitably as spring will break through in our world just a few months from now. We know that Christ left us everything we need to be saved if we would just open our hearts to the Holy Spirit. As Paul says, we have no reason to wait in fear, and every reason to wait in hope:

Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:7-9)

Amen.

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