



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Drawing Near

LUKE 21:25-36

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Advent is a season that is intended to mess with our sense of time.

We live with a very orderly idea about the passage of time: 2020 is followed by 2021 is followed by 2022, all neat and numbered. 60 seconds make a minute, 60 minutes make an hour, 24 hours make a day; repeat as needed. We age by incrementally adding up the years since the day we were born; we think about the future in terms of estimated time left. We have a nice, organised, linear view of time: the past was before today, the present is right now, and the future starts tomorrow.

How we feel about time at any given moment, though, may not be quite so tidy and evenly-paced. With the anticipation of a joyful, happy event, marked a month or two from now on our calendars, we might find that time slows to a crawl. On the other hand, an event we're not looking forward to seems to arrive way too fast. There's never enough time, or always too much. Time can feel feather-light or brick-heavy, and who among us hasn't felt time shift and ebb around us in new and unsettling ways during the global pandemic?

Time marches on, like it or not. I asked an older family member how she was doing once, and she told me she grows older, every...single...day.

But Advent invites us to slip out of step with the march of human time and into God's time instead. The season of Advent – and the rest of the church year – repeats every year, in exactly the same way.

Church time is a cycle, a circle, that we travel around, not a straight line we move along that always takes us always further away from Advent. No, church time brings us back again to the same moments, every year. And so, here we are again: the first Sunday of Advent. And this year, Advent is going to especially mess with our sense of time.

Let me pull back the curtain a little and reveal to you some of the inner workings of being a minister, and how I choose what Bible text to preach on every Sunday. There is something called a lectionary, a three-year schedule of

Scripture texts, that guides me. A lectionary of some sort has been in use somewhere for most of the history of the Christian church; the current one was released in the 1990s, I think. Anyway, I don't have to follow it and quite often I don't, but part of its purpose is to keep me from just preaching about my favourite bits of the Bible over and over. And I was sorely tempted to go off schedule and do my own thing this week after seeing we were meant to read Luke 21.

This is not a very festive way to start the season.

But guided by the lectionary, what we will be doing over the next four weeks is travelling backwards through time, from near the end of Jesus' ministry back through John the Baptist, and all the way to Mary and the moment of Jesus' conception. And we begin our time-travelling Advent adventure with this unsettling statement that Jesus' makes, a few days before the end: before he is arrested, tried and crucified.

This message that Jesus shares, about disturbing signs, a fig tree, and an attitude of watchful waiting, as told to us here by Luke, is a repeat, a re-telling of an almost-identical speech that's also in Mark's gospel.

The difference between the two gospels is time, and it affects the way the gospel writers handle the story. Mark's gospel was written within a few of decades of Jesus' death and resurrection, and the expectation was that Jesus would come again, and soon.

But Luke – Luke was writing for a community of Christians further away from Jesus' time than that. And it is clear that Luke's readers are wrestling with the question of time, specifically how long will they have to wait for Jesus' second Advent.

As the years have marched onward, further away from Jesus' earthly life, the whole thing has gotten really very vague and uncertain. So Luke shifts the emphasis from when Jesus will return to how we wait for him to come back, assuring the Christian community – for two thousand years now – that we'll know when Jesus, when the kingdom of God, is drawing near. And we should be eager to see those signs, confident in our waiting, resistant to despair, worry and hopelessness.

Jesus, through his gospel writers, has left us with something of a conundrum.

We've only read a small part of his dire description of signs of his own second advent coming. But that small part has been worrying enough: the distress of nations, people being made breathless with fear in the present and with a sense of impending doom about the future. And as we observe these ominous signs, we are meant to read them as a good thing, as a strong indication that our redemption, that God's kingdom in Christ, is drawing near.

We generally-speaking have pretty positive views of the kingdom of God, specifically about the changes that will happen to life as it is once we are living in the kingdom.

In a society that perfectly reflects God, in which God will be fully with us, even more so than when Jesus was born Emmanuel, life will be as God intended it: everyone will have abundantly enough of what they need to flourish; there will be peace – whole and right relationships among us and between us and God; loss and fear and worry will be things of the past; pain and suffering completely removed from our experience. The kingdom of God is a new world order that we long for; its coming, surely, without question, a very good thing.

And yet Jesus presents us with this troubling paradox, in which the very good thing of his second advent is heralded – not by joyous angels and excited shepherds like the first one – but by heart-breaking, breath-taking, world-rending events. Jesus' fig tree illustration is the only explanatory remark he offers, but the signs he describes suggest nothing like spring buds, summery growth and cozy autumn harvests to our imaginations.

Let's step back for a moment from the unsettling signs of the end of history, and from the fig tree. What is the core of the problem, for Luke's first readers and every one of us who has read these verses since? What is at the heart of the paradox of this statement that Jesus makes, near the end of his earthly life?

I think the problem is time.

For Luke's early readers, the time problem was that Jesus had not come back, and those devastating signs were very much apparent in their world and getting worse, perhaps most horrifyingly in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, a place of worship and a symbol of God-with-us that still meant a lot to these early Christians. For us, well, we kind of have the time problem, too, only more so: if the kingdom of God is drawing near, then surely, two thousand years on, we must be closer to its arrival date. History has marched on and there has been no lack of heart-breaking, world-rending events, both personal and global. Centuries have passed, full of breath-taking signs just like the ones Jesus described...and still, no Advent, round two.

And the only explanation we've got from Jesus is a fig tree: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees," Jesus said; "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."

Many springs have come and gone, so clearly Jesus was not speaking literally. No, in drawing our attention to the seasonal cycle of the fig tree, Jesus was encouraging us to think about time the way that God does. You may have heard of this before, in another sermon or in a book somewhere.

Where we live chronologically, measuring time in a long line of years and months, hours and days, seconds evenly ticked out on the clock, God does not. God's view of time and history and how his own work fits into our lives doesn't operate in the same way at all. These days we call God's view of time *kairos*.

Where we would ask, what time is it? God asks, is it the right time? That's the difference between our human time and God's *kairos*.

And that difference in perspective is perfectly illustrated by Jesus' fig tree.

The buds do not break on the branch on, oh let's say, May 2nd, every spring, at precisely 10:32am; that would be silly. What if there's still snow on the ground, on that day this year? Or what if the overnight temperatures are still too cold? The buds break at the opportune time, when sunshine and moisture and the tree itself are ready, when the conditions and circumstances are just right, that's when we see a bud form, that's when leaves appear.

And then Jesus takes us just a little further into God's time-keeping by telling us that not only do the leaves appear at the right moment, their appearance has two other effects as well: the new leaves remind us of spring-times passed, and how always before, those new leaves heralded summer growth and autumn harvests after; and they tell us that once more, in the present moment, summer is drawing near. Past, present and future, all speaking through a single leaf on an otherwise bare branch, if you know what you're looking at.

Jesus and his fig tree teach us how to look at the present, and hold past and future up beside it, and use all three to find hope now. Christ has come, and Christ is coming, and Christ will come again – and that's Advent, in the fullest, *kairos*, sense of the word.

Stepping out of our time-is-a-long-straight-line view and into God's time of the cycle of seasons and opportune moments allows us to hope, even as signs of heart-breaking, breath-taking, world-rending turmoil unfold around us. Because humanity is not accumulating tragedy and devastation over time until we reach a precise weight of terrible events and then Jesus will come back – like snow piling up on a roof until it collapses. That's not how it works; there are always signs like the ones Jesus described. Jesus is not advising us to tally them up, subtracting good years and adding up the bad and estimating when we'll collectively have had enough; Jesus is telling us to observe what happens around us and know with certainty and hope that turmoil and upset and change mean that the kingdom of God is drawing near.

And quite right, too. The whole point of the kingdom of God is that it's going to upend and change the world, and whether we're talking about John the Baptist or Mary during Advent, or other times that God drew near in the Bible – like Hannah and her song of her son Samuel and cultural transformation from a couple of Sundays ago – they all proclaim the same truth: at the right moments, at the opportune time, God draws close, and things change. And setting aside history and world events, we can see where that's been true in our own lives, too, when we look back. When we've been afraid or lost, suffering, lonely, needing comfort and peace and direction – it's the nearness of Jesus that changed that, that has helped us the most.

That certainty of Jesus' help in the past – your own or our shared past as Christians – coupled with hope for a future of even greater nearness with God... it makes the present not just bearable, but a place of hope.

And that is what Jesus is describing here, writ large and enfolding all of human history, lived year after year.

In God's kairos time, the certainty of past experiences, the vision for the future coming of Jesus and the kingdom, and our observations of present turmoil and change all weave together to let us live each present moment with hope. A single leaf on an otherwise bare branch doesn't fill our bellies with fruit. The figs will not be ready to harvest for sure, precisely, on October 3rd at 2:52pm. But in that present moment, with a leaf just out of the bud, we know that when the time is right, there will be an abundant harvest. And that is the best definition we get, I think, of what it means to celebrate and proclaim hope, again and again, season after season, on the first Sunday of Advent.

We may feel that we live at a great distance from the early Christian community that Luke was writing for; most people, I suspect, don't worry all that much from one day to the next about the end of history and the second advent of Jesus. But at the same time, we share the experience of waiting with every reader of Luke's gospel that ever was, especially waiting for an event that seems much delayed in its coming.

Today, we may be waiting for a world-sized change, like economic recovery, or a cessation of hunger and violence, or the end of the pandemic; we may be waiting for something deeply personal, like medical test results, or a holiday or reconciliation between ourselves and a loved one. Whatever we wait for, we know the challenge of waiting, the stress of waiting, the frustration of an event that never seems to happen now.

Hope and a sense of God's time doesn't end our watchful waiting, but it does change how we wait.

We live between these two big kairos moments, when Christ came on that first Christmas, and when Christ will come again, to finally make all things new and whole, to bring peace and abundant life for us, forever. And in this in-between time, we wait...and we witness...and we work together to nudge our world and the kingdom that much closer to one another.

But most of all, we hope, even in the midst of the very real set-backs, disappointments, pain and worries of this life. We can hope, and do what Jesus said to do, because we know the end and the beginning of the story: we can stand up and raise our heads, because we have heard and believed the promise that God's kingdom is drawing near. Thanks be to God. Amen.