

I imagine that the Minnesotan winter analog to the text of the fig tree from Matthew 24 (i.e. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near”) is the moment when the ice on the lake is able to support a snowmobile, fish house, and fisherman or woman. In the same way as there are stages that bring the fig tree to put forth leaves and you know summer is near, there are also stages on the way to lakes becoming extensions of the land between December and March and winter is very much here. There’s the first freeze, creating a smooth, translucent black sheet of ice across the shallower parts of the lake. There are the harder and sustained freezes that enclose the whole lake. And there are the days-on-end where the mercury dips below zero and the ice uniformly thickens throughout the lake. It’s after this last phase that you can rest assured of the solidity of the ice. Though that never stopped anyone from tempting fate and testing the ice a bit earlier. Not the sharpest tools in the shed!

I refer to the fig tree--and the ice--in part, because the season we are in--Advent--utilizes the imagery of the fig tree as a sign of the times. The end times. (And for any self-respecting ice fisherman or fisherwoman you couldn’t find a more evocative image than when it is ripe to begin the winter season on the water.) We read the rhythms of nature to discern what potential benefit or boon, may come our way, or, conversely, what potential difficulty or disaster we seek to avoid. Attention. Awareness. Anticipation. They are hallmarks of the waiting and preparing that we do in Advent. They also are a healthy predispositions to take into any season of life.

However, when the rhythm is upset or altered, the result can be quite disorienting and demoralizing. Surely, the last nine months have made us abundantly aware of such experiences. It’s not even that up is down and down is up. It’s as if the whole system has been obliterated. The terms “up” and “down” no longer make sense in this very strange world. Only now we enter into a season that is rich with rhythm, ritual, symbol, and custom, and we know from previous experience that we can’t force the square peg of our deeply held memories and wishes into the round hole of the reality that we are living through. Christmas will be different.

Which I know will be hard to navigate, and there will be not just a little lamenting and mourning. There will be plenty. And that is okay. It, too, is a part of our tradition. Yet, an important truth struck me as the Book Group discussed *Advent and Christmas Wisdom from Henri J.M. Nouwen* this past Sunday. Near the end of our time together, one member commented, “Y’know, I think for the first time I *really* understand what the waiting, and hoping, and longing of Advent mean.” While I would never wish what we have experienced as a way to deeper understanding on anyone, I also know that precisely what we have experienced has shaped us in ways that, while not easy or enjoyable, will resonate with us for years to come, maybe the rest of our lives. And far from just temporal pain or suffering, there may be deep wisdom that we can mine in this moment.

Indeed, these experiences give us a sensitivity that we may not have possessed. They may allow us to see in a way that we weren't aware of. They force us to confront things that we otherwise could suppress or obscure. Such experiences force us to look at the fig tree--and the ice on the lake--through a new lens. To alter an old metaphor, the old wineskins of our life cannot contain the new wine that we are experiencing. It's not that we throw everything away. Start over again in 2021. Rather, we are invited in powerful, profound, and, at times painful ways to see our life, recognize our fragility, understand our interconnectedness, and find ways to discern the new rhythm that has grown up around us, whether we know it or not, or accept it or not.

Indeed, too many have rejected the reality in which we live and are like those knuckleheads heading out onto the ice a few freezes too early. They live dangerously with their lives, and, unfortunately, with the lives of those around them. I stumbled onto a wonderful letter by clergy in Minneapolis committing to a virtual Christmas. You can read the letter [here](#). It is a wise and prudent response to the world in which we live. I signed St. Francis onto it as well. Lest we think that our time is unique, the following was a sobering reminder from that letter that we just haven't learned:

*In 1527, as the Bubonic Plague entered Wittenberg, the German Reformer Martin Luther not only urged his congregation to care for the sick, but also criticized those who disdained precautions in order "to prove how independent they are." In contrast to behavior he described as "tempting God," Luther vowed, "I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence."*

We don't need to prove how independent we are. Neither do we need to tempt God. What we do need is to care for the sick and ask God to mercifully protect us. Indeed, one of the insights of this time is how much we need each other, how much we need to care for one another, and how God is embodied in that caring. Yes, the ice is almost out. However, it is not yet time to fish. That time, soon enough, will come. Better now to stay in.