

Time for Advent

The First Sunday of Advent

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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On that day there shall not be either cold or frost. And there shall be continuous day (it is known to the LORD), not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem ... Zechariah 14:6-8a

Jesus said, "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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 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. - Luke 21:25-31

At another church a number of years ago, I asked a parishioner to preach on this first Sunday of Advent and in response to the same Scriptures we've heard this morning. Chris Hill was, and may still be, a professional writer and a fine theologian. He had that knack for seeing things that the rest of us miss. His sermon for the First Sunday of Advent did not disappoint.

Chris deftly earned his Anglican preaching credentials by quoting lines from the English poets William Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot. He invoked them to explore notions of time, and in particular the classic Christian distinction between two kinds of time.

The time of which most of us are most aware most of the time, the time against which most of us know we are fighting a losing battle, is linear, unstoppable and finite. It often feels diabolical.

Christians are traditionally drawn, however, to the notion that there is also another kind of time. Or perhaps we are meaning some quality or experience or intimation of something that is time-less -- without time, beyond time. In today's first reading, the prophet Zechariah envisions it as '*continuous day*.' (14:7)

Chris Hill conveyed his own version of this time-less-ness by way of a particular personal memory:

"Last year, one Saturday morning in Advent, I got up early and took our dog out for a walk, into the woods down the railroad tracks from our house. The neighbors' wind chimes were ringing.

A dusting of snow blew back and forth across the sidewalk. As we came out into the clearing, the woods were completely quiet. Even the birds were quiet. The only sound was the creaking of the trees in the wind.

There were two children, off in the woods on the hill on the other side of the gully. I could occasionally see the bright colors of their jackets, flickering from tree to tree.

The sense of waiting was palpable. Something huge was developing, something enormous was on its way. The woods felt like a room waiting for someone to come in."

Some of us here may recall a similar experience, maybe not walking the dog. That *viola solo*. The incomparable silence you shared with someone you utterly trust. A ladybug crawling along your finger. Any mundane moment that opens up to something more, '*like a room waiting for someone to come in.*'

Some of our Christian belief and speculation about time, and about what we call the *end of time*, comes from the final chapters of all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. Today's text from Luke takes us to the same place and the same time and the same circumstances as those from Mark's gospel on which Father Petite preached with such insight two weeks ago.

These corresponding gospel texts draw our attention to the eventual fate of the world and how desperate things will become before the final *final* end of things and "*Is it possible it might actually happen in my own lifetime?*"

Viewed through this lens, the realities that are meant by words like eternity and the kingdom of God are deferred for now. They are being saved up, held back, for after the world's last violent gasp. I found it useful when Father Petite invited us to think of this as the anguish of a pregnant woman's labor followed by the joy that will follow.

But what if eternity and the reign of God are also already with us, here and now? When all of "*these [dire] things begin to take place,*" Jesus says, "*stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" Maybe Jesus is only talking about signs of the apocalypse, but maybe he is also or instead inviting us to be on the lookout for the divine in the ordinary, the time-less in time, even amidst whatever end times, on whatever scale, are gnawing at you or me.

The poets and the mystics and Chris Hill join Jesus in suggesting today that our spiritual practice should include keeping an eye on the simple, barren fig tree. Be on the lookout for those first buds and sprouting leaves. Pay attention to that yearning in the heart that you thought had died off but seems to be welling up again.

You or I may not be as lofty as the poets and mystics, but haven't we also caught glimpses of the light beyond? The veil lifts. Even if only fleetingly, the divine dimension overtakes this one. And it may take place, often does, in the most ordinary, or the most contradictory, of circumstances. Some have called this *the sacrament of the present moment*.¹

Looking back on and making meaning from his Saturday-in-Advent dog walk, Chris Hill imagined this: "*I don't think the woods always felt that way. All the advents that all humans had ever had were working together outside of straight line time at that moment, to create that moment. To wear away a weak spot in the time line where God's time could break through.*"

Advent invites you and me to reckon with time and to do so in the context of all that has ended or all that may be ending, whether the fate of the world or some personal apocalypse. Perhaps as a result we will become better stewards of this brief time that God has given us. Or maybe we'll be nudged to start some work of love that we've been resisting.

Or maybe it won't be about better managing our limited human time at all. Maybe we will simply wonder about the fig tree—catching and appreciating those moments that are time-less.

All those years ago, Chris Hill ended his sermon with some wise and gentle counsel on which I can't improve, so I will also end with them:

*"This Advent, most of the time your brain will not be living in the timeless moments, in Christian time. That's all right, your heart and soul will be. You don't have to make it happen. It's happening anyway all around you and inside you. There's nothing you can do about it. What you can do is grab one or two of those disappearing moments and turn toward the moment that is always there, that is now and ever shall be. It's always there, as close as your heartbeat. You have a standing invitation."*²

¹ The notion of *the sacrament of the present moment* is widely used and is widely associated with the book *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, attributed to Jean-Pierre de Caussade. The book's origin is disputed, in part because it was not published until 1851, 100 years after his death.

² Christopher Hill preached the sermon at St. Andrew's Church, Madison, on the First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2000.