

Sermon, 1st Advent, Year B, November 29, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

“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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates...” (Mark 24:32-33)

I found it startling to encounter an image in today’s Gospel for the first Sunday of Advent that points to the coming of summer. Summer is far off on the horizon, much less near to arriving! Yet for those who are paying attention, it is possible to see the signs of returning warmth and light, of new fruitfulness. The coming of winter has its own beauty. When the leaves are completely down from the trees, the beautiful lace of the branches may be seen. It is a stark, even harsh, beauty. Yet it may be in this time that it is easier to see the signs of returning life, however faint.

The images Jesus employs in the beginning of today’s passage are more apocalyptic. It is language that we associate with Scripture books such as Revelation or Daniel. An apocalypse is an event that reveals, that uncovers, that points to a new reality. Most especially in the season of Advent it is language that points to the coming of God’s glory here on earth. Paradoxically that glory is both hidden and revealed in Creation itself. It is both hidden and revealed in Jesus: a human being. Mark refers to Daniel 7:13: “As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.” All through Scripture clouds

represent God's presence. Pillars of cloud lead the Israelites through the desert in the daytime. Moses goes into the clouds to receive the tablets from God himself. When Solomon finally completes the building of the temple in ancient Jerusalem, God's glory is revealed in a cloud that does not simply hover over the temple but enters and fills it.

The image of the barely-blossoming fig is more subtle. The change is gradual, gentle, organic. God as Creator has placed signs for us in the natural world all around. Somehow it makes sense to have such an image for the beginning of Advent. We will have another month of the days becoming shorter. Yet concealed in the dark branches of December is the potential for new growth, new beginnings, and the return of the Light. Before putting forth new leaves, the branches of a fig tree become "tender." One would have to look closely to discern this. God comes to us in this time with tenderness. Hope, fragile as it may be sometimes, lies in the face of all tender things. It is revealed in the face of the soon-to-arrive baby Jesus.

How wonderful that God has such a variety of ways of capturing our attention, of waking us up! Falling stars are astonishing; they may be seen at various times of year. There will be another good time to view meteor showers in mid-December. I remember a wonderful camp-out during the summer where we stayed up late to see them. It helps to be in a place where it becomes completely dark, without manufactured lights to obscure the effect. I think of the spiritual "My

Lord What a Morning.” “My Lord what a morning, when the stars begin to fall. Just this morning I saw the almost-full moon as it was about to set. It was a beautiful rose-gold disc. The sky had cleared enough that I could see it clearly as I made my coffee. I had reason to be thankful I was awake!

One of my favorite books as a child was *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. Aslan the lion is the presence of Christ in the world. In this story his return is longed-for. It has been perpetual winter because of the machinations of the White Witch. Not only that, but Christmas never comes! Gradually it becomes clear that Aslan is abroad. The children in the story encounter Father Christmas at last with his sleigh and reindeer. Soon after that there are signs that winter is loosening its grip.

One of the boys in the story is named Edmund Pevensie. This is what he begins to see: “Every moment the patches of green grew bigger and the patches of snow grew smaller. Every moment more and more of the trees shook off their robes of snow. Soon, wherever you looked, instead of white shapes you saw the dark green of firs or the black prickly branches of bare oaks and beeches and elms. Then the mist turned from white to gold and presently cleared away altogether. Shafts of delicious sunlight struck down onto the forest floor and overhead you could see a blue sky between the tree tops. Soon there were more wonderful things happening. Coming suddenly round a corner into a glade of silver birch trees

Edmund saw the ground covered in all directions with little yellow flowers—celandines.” (Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, p. 110-111)

If we have the courage and persistence to stay awake, even in the darkest season of the year, what Light might appear on the horizon? What harbingers of new life may have begun to sprout in places we cannot yet see? Three times in our Psalm today we hear the psalmist’s fervent cry to God: “ Restore us, O God of hosts, show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.” The psalmist puts their whole faith in God’s light. We can do the same; but we have to be awake.

I have new neighbors next door, and they have a little boy of about 3 ½ or 4. He is a wonderfully exuberant child and loves to play outside. I noticed a few days ago that the family had decorated the bushes outside their door with beautiful ornaments. A couple of evenings ago, just after dark, I heard delighted shouts. I looked out my window and saw that they had added a string of white lights to the bushes, and lit them for the first time. I can see them from my bedroom window. From now until Christmas, if I need a reminder that the Light is coming—the Light that is also already here—I just need to peek out my window.

And the **G**lory
of the

Lord

shall be
revealed.

At the end of my sermon last week I referred to a poem by George Herbert. Here is the second half of that same poem:

“Then we will chide the sunne for letting night
 Take up his place and right:
We sing one common Lord; wherefore he should
 Himself the candle hold.
I will go searching, till I finde a sunne
 Shall stay, till we have done;
A willing shiner, that shall shine as gladly,
 As frost-nipt sunnes look sadly.
Then we will sing, shine all our own day,
 And one another pay:
His beams shall cheer my breast, and both so twine,
Till ev’n his beams sing, and my musick shine.”

—From “Christmas II” by George Herbert