

## **Homily – Be Alert for God**

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Today is the first Sunday in the season of Advent, a time of preparation as we get ready for the coming of Christ into the world as a baby boy. Last week we celebrated Christ as King and the end of our church calendar. This week we celebrate the start of a new church calendar and a new year, so it is a little odd that we have a gospel reading about endings. Some see this passage as one about the final days of the universe, but I think that is not a helpful way to understand what Jesus is telling us. Instead, I think Jesus is calling us to be aware of the endings and new beginnings that are already happening all around us. Like yesterday, and like tomorrow, today is a day full of endings and new beginnings. Some of them may be more momentous than others. God is always recreating the world and by extension recreating us in a pattern that can be described as order, disorder, and reorder.

Now, over the years I have been reading Scripture, and my reading and use of scripture has shifted as my spiritual journey continues onward. I think that is one of the beauties of the Bible. As life progresses, we get drawn to the Bible in different ways. More recently, as I read the Bible instead of looking for answers I have been looking for wisdom, solidarity, and inspiration. Perhaps it's not surprising that this year I have read today's Gospel reading a little differently.

"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."

This passage is classified as Apocalyptic Literature, and it is a form or genre of writing that was popular from about two hundred years before Jesus to about two hundred years afterwards. It is a form of literature that comes out of deep pain and suffering, and it uses vivid language to point to a time in which all will be made right. Suffering will end and peaceful, joyous living will begin. There is a lot of symbolism in Apocalyptic writings. The Old Testament book of Daniel and the New Testament Revelation of John are two significant examples. Snippets of Apocalyptic writing creep into other books of the Bible including the Gospels.

This year as I grapple with today's passage from Luke, instead of looking for signs of the "end times" or trying to predict anything, I'm simply trying to understand what is being "revealed" in all that is happening in today's world. Remember, the word "apocalyptic" simply means to "unveil." It was never meant to be a synonym for bad

news. Instead, Apocalyptic Literature “pulls back the curtain” to reveal what is real, what is true, and what is lasting. And what is being revealed is never what we think it is. That is the gift of this literature and perhaps the gift of a time like the one we’re living through today.

Sometimes we get a shock that forces us out of what we take for granted as normal so that we can redefine normal. Apocalyptic Literature uses vivid language and images, such as stars falling from the sky and the metaphor of the moon turning to blood to help us recognize that we’re not in Kansas anymore. It’s not that it’s the end of the world, but it helps us imagine the end of “our world” as we know it.

That doesn’t mean life doesn’t go on, but that our lives won’t go on the way we thought they would, could, and even should. It allows us to see that what we thought was necessary and inevitable, simply isn’t, and that, as the Buddhist chant in their Diamond Sutra, everything is eventually “Gone, gone, utterly gone.” And that is a gift from God. Gone. Gone. Utterly gone.

When things are “unveiled,” we stop taking things for granted. That’s what major events like the COVID pandemic do for us. They reframe reality in a radical way and offer us an invitation to greater depth and breadth. If we trust the universal pattern, including the creation and evolution of the cosmos itself, we know that an ending is also the place for a new beginning. Death is followed by a new kind of life. Once again we have moved from order, to disorder and eventually to reorder again. In the past, I have preached about this wisdom cycle for individuals. On Easter Sunday we call this pattern life, death, and resurrection. Today, I want to extend this wisdom cycle from the individual to the social. Communities, nations and even society itself go through the three stages of the wisdom cycle. We begin this cycle in order. Our world is plugging along. We have our routines, and as far as we know things are just fine. But then disorder happens.

There will always be at least one situation in our lives that we cannot fix, control, explain, change or even understand. Normally a job, a fortune, or a reputation has to be lost, a house has to be flooded, an illness has to be endured. And, sometimes this event is something in our world or nation that has shifted so that we are thrown to the floor as a people. In each case, the wisdom pattern requires that some kind of fall be programmed into the journey. And, it is normal that we still want to go backwards to some kind of previous order and reason, but part of the lesson of this time of disorder is that we are not in charge. Rather than forcefully moving ourselves back into the old ordered way of being, we must be open to the disorder. Be warned, however, that for the individual the ego and false-self will try to regain control. And at the societal level the powers and principalities will try to regain control. But unexpected weaknesses, failure, and humiliation force us to go where we would

never go otherwise. We must stumble and be brought to our knees by reality. We must actually be out of the driver's seat for a while, or we will never learn how to give up control to the Real Guide. The Wisdom Cycle is the necessary pattern of movement from order to disorder. But then it can move to reorder.

And unfortunately, the wisdom pattern never moves directly from order to reorder. There is no nonstop flight that does not go through the connecting hub of disorder. For the meaningful spiritual growth of our society and culture this journey from order to disorder must first happen. Our role is to listen in our own lives, and to allow, and at least slightly to cooperate with this almost natural progression. And, we come to wisdom at the major price of both our innocence and our control. Few of us go there willingly. Normally, it must be thrust upon us. However, as followers of Jesus, Easter reminds us that death is not the end. Disorder does not have the final word. Winter turns into Spring. I'm not sure why God created the universe this way, but I have to trust the cycle that is shown to us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Now, every religion in its own way talks about getting us to the reorder stage. Various systems would call it enlightenment, paradise, heaven, wisdom, salvation, springtime, or for the followers of Jesus, resurrection. It is the life on the other side of death, the victory on the other side of failure, the joy on the other side of birthing pains. It is an insistence on going through—not under, over, or around. Again, there is no nonstop flight to reorder. And, from your own life experience you may recognize that this pattern of order, disorder, and reorder has happened several times in your own life. It does not happen once, for we all have many cycles of life, death, and resurrection. We all travel the wisdom cycle. And, historians would show us this same cycle in the life of our country. The pain of the Civil War is the most stark example.

Now while one is in a stage of disorder it can be impossible to see where society is going. In hindsight it might be obvious but during the turmoil it is hard to see. And this is where the teachings of Jesus come in again. As we heard at the end of today's Gospel reading, "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

When I was in business school I had a class called "Trend Watching." Historically, most, but not all, trends in our country start on the coasts. Consumer trends, fashion trends, and even technology trends start on the coasts. However, I think it is safe to say that some trends start in the heart land. They percolate in Arkansas, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. And in business school the value of trend watching is to make a fortune. You can be on the cutting edge of a trend and make a lot of money.

The value of trend watching is a little different for followers of Jesus. Instead of consumer trends we are watching for those trends that are leading us away from God and those beautiful trends that are leading us back into right relationship with God, others, and self. Spirituality itself is all about relationships so we are vigilantly watching for trends that lead us to healed relationships. We can all sense that our society is full of broken relationships that have led us to a state of disorder. However, we must stay alert at all times, praying that we all may have the strength to escape all this disorder that we have today so that we can once again, stand before the Son of Man in right relationship with God and others. This is no easy task for there will be missed opportunities, and we may even get lost down paths that mislead. However, today's strange gospel reading about the sun, moon, and stars is a call to stay alert and be part of the solution that leads back to God.

And, I want to share a silly little spiritual exercise to help you stay alert and aware. In March 2020 in the first weeks and months of the stay at home emergency, like many of you I was alarmed by the things that were happened with the pandemic. And each week I wrote a negative experience on a sticky note and put it on the mirror in our bedroom. My pilgrimage walk in Spain was cancelled. We could not worship together in-person. I had a strong sense of dis-ease around others at the grocery store. Then each week I also started writing positive things on a sticky note and putting that on the other side of our bedroom mirror. Life slowed down. Jeff was no longer out of town a dozen nights a month. There was more time for gardening. And, I went a long time without using my alarm clock. During lock down I think it was important to give name to and write down the negative experiences. But it was equally important to be aware of the positive experiences that were happening.

So today, whether you think we have entered a stage of new reorder in society or if you feel we have entered a stage of disorder, in all circumstances writing down both positive and negative experiences can be a meaningful spiritual practice as you stay alert and aware. And don't write down things from the news and the internet. Write down things that you, your neighbors, and your loved ones have experienced. I wonder what trends you will see on your stickies. I wonder how God is working, even today, through those experiences.

Advent is a time of preparation for new beginnings. It is a time of watching and being aware of things that you might not have noticed before. And using the words from the great Advent hymn we will sing at the end of this worship service. "Signs of endings all around us, can it be that from our endings, new beginning you create? Give us hope and faith and gladness. Show us what there yet can be."