

“Were Those Days These Days?”

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The First Sunday in Advent

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and all the powers in the heavens will be shaken (24-5).

When were those days, I wonder, when world events seemed to resound with cosmic implications? When were those days when it seemed as though the sun and the moon had gone dark, and as if the very stars were literally falling from their fixed orbits in the heavens?

I’m trying very hard to make sense of the times in which we are living. And I’m struggling with that. Times where right is wrong and wrong is right, or so we’re told. Where news is fake because there are always alternative facts. I’m trying to make sense of a world where it’s not the poor who need help or who would most benefit from tax cuts, but the wealthiest of our citizens and our richest corporations that, as we have been informed, are people too. My God, my God.

Then there are the almost daily revelations of sexual harassment charges being brought against powerful men, after years of silence, revealing that this is not a new problem but is something that has long been lurking in environments where it was allowed to flourish.

And then there is the blatant, vulgar racism that has been emboldened today—things like the president trying to honor the Navaho Code Talkers, who played a key role in World War II, who used a racial slur in the process while forcing them to stand beneath a portrait of Andrew Jackson, of all people—this is something that anyone with even a little decency in them, or an understanding of history, should find horrifying. No, racism isn’t new, but its vocal practitioners today are energized and encouraged by stunts like that.

I’m trying to get my head around the fact that another black boy was shot by police yesterday, and that far more black boys get shot by police in this country than do white boys. And I continue to fear the provoking and taunting of a nuclear power that seems hell-bent on disrupting the world because of its own search for an identity.

So when were those days when it seemed like the world had come unhinged? When the sun and moon gave off no light and stars fell from the sky—when nothing seemed to work the way it was supposed to work, and the powers in the heavens were shaken? When were those days? Because whenever those days were, they feel to me like these days. These days, seem eerily similar to those days, and I wonder if you feel that way too?

And when Jesus tells those followers to keep alert, to keep awake and to keep watching, there is a part of me that would rather do just the opposite, frankly. I'd rather stop looking and would be all too happy just to tune it out. And if I'm honest, I feel that way because watching it all unfold is unsettling at best and terrifying at its worst. I don't know who is in charge, and I don't know where things are headed. I don't understand or accept our current, prevailing values and actions that, in so many ways, run counter to the gospel. This world of ours stands in dire need of redemption.

Things cannot continue as they are. Something needs to happen. Things need to change. Someone needs to come and ransom all the lonely exiles here.

Look to the fig tree, says Jesus on this First Sunday in Advent, our season of waiting. Look to the fig tree because when you see its buds, you know that winter is over and spring has come. You know that summer will come, the way it always comes. Surely, you don't question its coming, do you? You know it will come. Spring and summer always come.

Yes, there are dark periods—days when the shadows are long and the light seems fleeting. There are times when warmth gives way to the cold and things lay dormant, as though they were dead. But spring will come and so will summer, the way they always do. They always come, and surely, a day of reckoning is coming. It's coming.

So keep alert. Keep awake and keep watching, because the Son of Man is coming and it could happen anytime. But it doesn't change the fact that it can be so difficult to wait when the world seems dark. It is not easy to wait when we want so desperately for something to change now, for things to get better now, for the light to shine in our darkness now, and to shine brightly. But remember, it was into just such a troubled world that a child was born.

When the exiles and the occupied, those who were captives in their own land, thought they knew exactly what they needed in order to remedy their situation, or to solve their political predicament, the answer would come *not* in the form of a grander pomp or in self-declared, self-serving victories, it would come in the form of a vulnerable child, being born in the middle of the night, in a non-descript town, to un-wed, lower middle-class parents for whom there was no room. And it would be noticed by a few random shepherds who somehow thought they heard angels singing.

We always want our victories to be big and bold, decisive in ways that leave no doubt. But that wasn't the way it happened then, and more often than not, it's not the way it will happen when it happens next. Thus, the need to pay attention and watch for it.

Because it is often in the small, quiet, seemingly insignificant acts of kindness and grace, that real hope is born. That in a troubled and unsettling world—a world groaning in labor pains waiting to be born anew, that the presence of the one who came long ago bearing the imprint of God, can still be experienced today, in the midst of it all. And that seems to be the very point of Advent.

The one who came will come again, in ways new and surprising and necessary to sustain our spirits and give us hope in the living of these days. That in a world gone mad, teetering on the verge of unthinkable violence and destruction, peace is still present. In a world that seems dark, the light still shines. And in a clamoring, shrill and deafening world, it is still possible to hear above all the noise, angels singing. That in a time when the world's principalities and powers seem to be having their way, advancing their own interests at the expense of the truly needy, and going about it seemingly unchecked, a day of reckoning is coming as sure as the spring thaw.

Reasons for awe and beauty and wonder and thanksgiving can never be taken away from us. And our ultimate fate does not depend on the Herods or Caesars who strut the world's stages during their fifteen minutes of fame. It just doesn't.

Our ultimate hope comes from the God who came among us with a human face, at a time when the world was a mess—when shepherds had to stand guard even as angels were singing. People of God, in a broken and fearful world, God's glory still shines, hallelujah's resound, and from that baby's first breath has grown a breathing hope in and for the world God so loves.

Keep awake.

Keep alert.

Watch for it.

Live into it.

Amen.