

## Keeping Watch in the Darkness

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*Texts: Luke 21: 25-36*

Beloveds, I've been having trouble sleeping lately. Anyone else there with me? For those of you who are sleeping soundly and plenty – I love that for you. Bless you. Lord knows we need some of us in these times who are well-rested! But I'm glad to know I'm not alone in being awake at night. Sometimes, when I'm lying there in that gray light of 3 am that's nowhere near sunrise, I remember the way Wendell Berry's poem "The Peace of Wild Things" begins. He writes, "When despair for the world grows in me, and I wake in the night at the least sound, in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be..." Awake in the night at the least sound – yep. I think that's a lot of us these days. And those early hours can feel so desperate, can't they? The minutes seem to stretch for eons, as if time bends in on itself. And at least in my sweet little 3 am mind, it seems as if the whole world is sleeping peacefully except for me. Do you know what I'm talking about? In the thick of the night, our minds can run away with us. It's as if the darkness of the unknown, and our involuntary wakefulness within it, can lure us into despair for the world, and fear for our lives or the lives of those we love.

Advent begins in this thick darkness. We begin this new liturgical year, this season of Advent, with a passage from the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus is delivering his last teaching before he goes to die. That's right – we begin the season of waiting for Jesus' birth by hearing what he says to us before he goes to die. And it's a foreboding passage, one that doesn't shy away from chaos, from the world seemingly coming undone – Jesus says, "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.” It sounds familiar, huh? It sounds like climate catastrophe. It sounds like a world aching under the weight of old stories of scarcity and dominance that mean that we treat the earth as a commodity. It sounds like political upheaval – “distress among the nations.” It sounds like how I feel sometimes in the thick of the night. And Jesus says to us, in Luke’s retelling, that it is into THIS level of upheaval, of uncertainty, of chaos and despair that the divine, called “the child of humanity,” will be born and reborn again. In fact, we will know that the divine is on their way because of the chaos and uncertainty and unraveling happening all around us.

Jesus goes on to share a very short parable about a fig tree. He says, just like when you see the leaves on the fig tree and you know it’s summer because of those leaves, so you will know that it is the season for the coming of the kin-dom of God when things start to go off the rails. When you see the world falling apart, when you glimpse the rich darkness of uncertainty all around, when the sea is roiling and people are fainting from fear, when the world is coming apart, Jesus says, that is the season in which God’s kin-dom will be born on earth.

So we can’t begin a season of anticipating the birth of God, Luke seems to say, without first sitting in the muck of it all, in the fear, in the chaos, in the shadows. Without recognizing our interbeing with all life, and all life that is suffering in this time: without being alongside the traumatized soldier, the starving refugee, the trans child scared to go to school, the heartbroken addict, the grieving family. Without being with our own shadows, our own terror, and our own sense of powerlessness over all of it. That is where Advent starts.

We talk about the Advent season as a season of waiting. But today, on this first Sunday of Advent, I want us to explore Luke’s more active

language. Luke writes that Jesus said, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert.” Be on guard. Be alert. Another way to say it? Keep watch.

Keep watch for all the ways God is being born anew again this season. Keep watch for the ways the divine finds the cracks in the upheaval of this season in the world. Put your attention there. Don't get distracted, don't get weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, Jesus says. In the midst of the darkness, in the midst of the upheaval, put your attention on all the ways that God is arriving in this world, even now.

In preparing to preach this week, I came across the work of a twelfth-century abbot and theologian named Bernard of Clairvaux. He imagined three different advents: the first is the one we know best, the Advent we celebrate on Christmas, the birth of Jesus and the incarnation of the divine in human form. The last Advent, he said, is the Advent at the end of the age – the Advent of the apocalypse. This is the Advent that Jesus is teaching about in this passage from Luke this week. The coming of the divine as everything is falling apart. The birth of the new as the old crumbles to dust. But the in-between Advent – the second one – the one between the Advent of the beginning and the Advent of the end, is the Advent of God's everyday arrival in our lives and in our world. The Advent that happens hundreds of times a day, if we only put our attention on it. The way that we see the face of Jesus in an unhoused neighbor, in an incarcerated mother, in a sick friend. The way that we find pockets of divinity when we walk outside: in the cold air; in the raccoon who found herself a warm crook of the tree to sleep in, her belly rising and falling in rest; in the people who built a dome of sticks around a turtle who was nesting on the running path so that she would be safe to lay her eggs. In

the new leaves on my fiddle leaf fig tree – not the same species of fig as what Jesus is preaching about, but a fig nonetheless – that are sprouting as winter solstice approaches. God is coming, again and again – Jesus is coming, again and again, and we will see it if we keep watch for it. In this sense, hope is active – hope is a verb. In the midst of the swirling darkness and chaos, Jesus teaches us to keep watch for the everyday arrival of the divine.

The writer Adrienne Maree Brown says, “what we pay attention to grows.” Luke’s apocalyptic narrative falling on the first day of Advent is no accident – he is asking us, even in wild and uncertain times, to assume an active posture of anticipation, an active posture of waiting, to put our attention on the small and large and strange and unconventional ways God is being reborn in the world in this season. Our waiting in Advent is engaged. We are keeping watch for the divine, and we are willing to be surprised – as Mary was when the angel Gabriel came to her to announce that she would carry and birth and mother Jesus; as the wise men were when they chose to follow the star; as the donkeys may have been to find a human woman laboring in their stable as they dozed. We keep watch, and we expect to be surprised by the ways God shows up in the world, the way God comes to us. We keep watch, hoping to find God in the least likely places. We help grow God’s kin-dom by choosing where to place our attention. What we pay attention to grows.

We light candles each Advent to remind ourselves that hope is a verb – that even in the days of growing darkness, even in the midst of the roiling sea and the fainting and the nations clashing and the all-consuming worries of this life, we are keeping watch for the Christ child, born again each day into our world if we only practice looking for them. We light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love not to ignore the unraveling and the pain happening around us, but to remind ourselves that it is into this broken and hurting world that the child of humanity, divinity and humanity embodied in one, is

born. We light candles to remind ourselves that hope is a verb, hope is an action, even when the darkness of the unknown and the chaos of the world seems to envelope us.

So in these weeks of Advent – place your attention on the ways that God is being reborn in your life, in the world around you.

[Moment of pause here to have people find a way that God is showing up in their life].

Find the helpers. Light a candle even if you're in despair, even if you're doubting. Know that somewhere, somehow, someone is singing though their grief feels impossible. Feel it in the hands and hearts that offer you Communion today. If you're awake in the night with me at 3 am, imagine across town, or a few doors down, a parent awake with their tiny child on their chest, someone rising early to get ready for their job across town finding comfort in warm coffee, our unhoused neighbors seeking a warm place to sleep, the birds who are still here in the cold tucking their heads under their wings to find rest. Sense the leaves of the fig tree growing even in winter. By all means, get some sleep if you're able – and then practice keeping watch for ALL the ways the God is born and reborn in our midst every day. Amen.