

Being Present With Hope

Sunday, December 3, 2023

The First Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:24-37

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Jesus summons disciples to be alert and awake, even in the midst of terrifying struggles, pain, and confusion.

A few of my colleagues and I were reflecting on the ways this sense of being overwhelmed seeps into our spiritual lives. It erodes faith, and silences faith. So many persons feel overwhelmed by the pace of life. Paralyzed and numb, we stop paying attention to the miracles around us. My friends and commented on how this has eroded faith and paralyzed the church.

It's almost as if we have forgotten how to breathe.

Most of us, unless we have a serious medical condition, pay little attention to breathing. It just happens. On average, an adult takes a breath some 12 to 15 times a minute, 24 hours a day, waking or sleeping. We breathe, hopefully, even when we are unconscious. Our breathing is triggered by impulses within our brain. Thankfully, all of this is automatic. I mean, there are days when it is all that I can do to remember where I put my keys. How on earth would any of us remember to breathe consistently?

Yet we do not always breathe correctly. Deep breathing reduces blood pressure, and alleviates stress. It improves our overall sense of well-being and health. But it is also an ancient form of prayer that reminds us that the breath of God lives within us. During Advent, let's learn how to breathe again. Let us allow the experience of inhaling the gift of God's spirit to remind us that we already have the most important gift we can ever give to others: the gift of ourselves.

Advent and Christmas is among the most stressful time of the year. it is a season focused on finding the right gifts, creating the perfect experiences, holding ourselves to impossible standards.

With that in mind, let me introduce a new practice in worship. Let us begin attending to God's word first by attending to our own physical bodies, the temple where God dwells. I invite you to join me in taking a deep, calming breath. Take a deep breath now, allowing it to fill your belly with the warmth of God's spirit. As you exhale, give thanks for the joy of knowing you are loved. Breathe in, giving thanks for God's presence, and breathe out, rejoicing in the promise of God's love.

Breathe in the hope that in this moment, we can be freed from the worries that oppress us. Breathe in the peace that God will bring us at Christmas. Exhale in the possibilities of joy in this moment. Breathe in promises of love, and exhale with the assurance that we are walking in God's light.

When we are stressed, or when anxiety oppresses us, our brain tells our bodies to breathe short, shallow breaths. It is an instinct related to our fight or flight response. That sort of breathing may help you if you're being chased by a tiger, but the problem comes when stress and anxiety are acute. Like, for example, during Christmas.

We struggle with finding the center that helps us be present. When I ran across the ideas for our Advent worship themes, I was intrigued by the notion that the Good News is that being present is perhaps the best present we can receive or give at Christmas. We have, in fact, been given that present a long time ago in the birth and life of Jesus Christ. God's incarnation makes it possible to be freed from the anxiety that swirls around us as we experience the gift of being present

It may sound like a ridiculous question but ask yourself if you have forgotten how to breathe. Practicing the gift of mindfulness at Christmas will allow us to receive the greatest gift of all: Christ who is present with us.

Marcia McFee, who developed the ideas behind this worship series has said that "our only job (at Christmas) is to open ourselves to the gift of presence in whatever the moments of our lives are presenting to us." But, she adds, "this is not small task because for the majority of us, our attention is scattered by to-do lists, the pressure of perfection, and the distraction (of) regrets..." We have been robbed of the gift God wishes to give us at Christmas.

So, breathe in once more. Breathe in such a way that God's gift of life fills you with wonder and peace, and as your body exhales, recall the deep joy of God who took on our flesh.

This is the nature of hope that Jesus proclaims in Mark 13—though his words may not sound too hopeful. Jesus' words shake us to our core. They are painful and disturbing – particularly to those whose lives are comfortable. As William Willimon says, we might be tempted to tell Jesus to keep his disruptive, earthshaking apocalyptic visions to himself.

But this is where the church begins its Advent journey. With its images of doom and gloom, it's hardly the image of a Currier and Ives Christmas card. It feels more like Charlie Brown picking out the worst Christmas tree in the lot.

Jesus, in Mark 13, is near the end of his life. This story is just about as far away as we can get from any story of Jesus' birth. Of course, Mark's Gospel does not include a birth story, no sheep or shepherds, no crowded inns or anxious parents. Instead, Mark moves quickly with the promise to tell the story of Jesus' good news.

Which makes me wonder: where is the good news in this passage? "In those days, after that suffering," Jesus says, "the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light."

Not exactly tidings of comfort and joy. Instead, Jesus describes the calamities of life, the suffering that is to come, the bad news that signals the end of time. It's a view of the world we call "apocalyptic," or "revealing," and it's not the sort of thing we expect to hear at Christmas.

If Jesus' message is one of doom and gloom, then we do not want to hear it. It is the sort of sermon that gives us the heebie-jeebies, or calls to mind hellfire and damnation, "turn or burn" sort of preaching. The world of the church is divided, Tom Long once wrote, between preachers who preach nothing else but the end of the world, and preachers who wouldn't touch apocalyptic texts with a ten-foot pole.

There's a story about a priest and a pastor who were standing by the side of a busy road. They are both holding signs that looked as if they had been written quickly. The pastor's sign read, "The end is near!" while the priest's sign said, "Turn yourself around now before it is too late!" As a car approached they waved

their signs trying to get the driver's attention. He apparently did not appreciate their warning, and instead rolled down his window. "Leave me alone, you religious nuts! I don't have time for your crazy beliefs." The driver sped by the two clergy persons. All of a sudden, there was the sound of a large splash.

Father O'Brien turned to his colleague and said, "Do you suppose we should have just put up a sign that read "Bridge out ahead" instead?"

When things are going well, when life is working at its best, we may have little use for Jesus' words of warning. When things begin to shake and fall apart, when the old answers we learned no longer work, when our health perplexes us and confounds us, then perhaps we ought to slow down, and discover the real present of Christmas once more.

Our granddaughter, Mia, has an elf that visits her every morning before Christmas. Grandma and I are delighted that this tradition began long after our children were young. The other day, Mia got up and began searching for the little guy. He was nowhere to be found – she looked in the kitchen, in the family room, in the dining room, in the bathroom. "I guess he's given up on me," she said. (Mia is in second grade, but should be given an Oscar.)

But then, just when all hope had elapsed, she got into the car to go to her soccer game. Guess who was waiting for her?

Jesus does not give us a precise calendar of when hope will arrive; instead, he calls us to persist in being alert, and awake. We are called to be present and aware. We are called to be awake, to be witnesses to the gift of hope. Keep breathing. Amen.