

“These Days”  
 Anna Pinckney Straight  
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
 December 3, 2017

Mark 13: 24 – 37

<sup>24</sup>“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

<sup>26</sup>Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

<sup>28</sup>“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. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>32</sup>“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup>Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup>Therefore, keep awake — for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup>or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

It’s the new year in the Church. A new liturgical year. The first Sunday of Advent, year B. of the three-year cycle of readings called the Revised Common Lectionary. Which starts, every year, with a reminder that Jesus coming among us was not a one-time-event. We’ve been promised a sequel.

If you can imagine the movie preview voice,

“In a world, where everything seems out of control, where the stars don’t follow their courses and people have forgotten the lessons taught to us by the plants, Jesus is coming back. You won’t know when. You won’t know where. But get ready. Jesus is coming back.” [the next part is said quickly, like fine print in an ad] “Coming sometime to the world where you live, but we can’t say when.”

Given the news of the past week- investigations and indictments, international hostilities, and a legislative process overhauling major governmental systems that, if approved, seems to place the United States squarely in the goat category of last Sunday’s final judgement reading, I would understand if you were to think I chose today’s reading for today.

But I didn’t. It’s the way we start every Advent, each journey to Bethlehem, remembering that all of our December celebrations are done not just to remember, but to look forward, Jesus has promised to come again, and it isn’t going to be quiet.

More than one commentator has reflected that the challenge with this text on this day is to recognize that we're not called to make sense of it, we're called to allow it to be what it is— wild and unmanageable. God will be what God will be and God will not be domesticated for our comfort.

One wrote: "I suggest we let the wildness be wild, let the lack of neat wrappings be missing without having to supply it....apocalyptic texts are songs that end with a V7 chord, that may not resolve to the root. Do we have the courage to let that happen?"<sup>1</sup>

I know a teacher, a mother, a former neighbor of mine who has that kind of courage. She wrote about it many years ago in a publication for her church.<sup>2</sup>

What is it about hand-holding? There is such perfect union in hands—in connecting through laced fingers or cupped palms. A small hand folded safely in a bigger one, a daughter's smooth hand holding a mother's careworn one, a husband and wife finding connection for a brief moment in a busy day, a son unabashedly clinging to his dad's. The warmth, the texture, the intimacy between people is daring and bold and necessary.

But one person in my family refused to hold hands. My youngest, Camille. She was born into the world with a sensitivity and defensiveness about her body. A defensiveness so strong that she screamed and cried when we tried to teach her things, hand over hand. It traumatized her. So when the blessing was sung, Camille was left alone. Family on either side of her left their palms upturned and open in case she might, by some miracle, have a change of heart and complete the circle.

Camille was born into the world and crowned with a diagnosis. A label of "autistic spectrum disorder" was the umbrella designation to include mental retardation, apraxia and other maladies. Medical journals, books, popular articles, and experts helped me learn too much about this neurological disorder—but I detest every iota of information I've sought to amass. It objectifies my daughter. The reports and grim outlooks dim her smile and potential and turn her into another case, a statistic.

This child, now four years old, has no words. Not one. Not "mama," "da da," "ball," "no," "mine"—nothing. I long to talk with her, not just to her. What an irony for me—one who has spent her professional career as a museum educator, as a communications officer, a teacher—to have a child who cannot utter one single, intelligible word.

....I....try to walk through the days as I see others do..... But I confess, I tire of pretending it's always O.K. I make excuses for my daughter's behavior when people peer into her face to say hello and she reacts by biting her arm or scrunching her hand over her eyes and wailing. "She's shy," I smile and say, or "she's tired."

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<sup>1</sup>D. Mark Davis, <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/11/images-of-hope-suffering-and-vigilance.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Waiting for Nothing to Change*, by Libby Fosso *Winner of the 2007 RCWMS Essay Contest Libby Fosso of Chapel Hill, The Essay Contest is made possible by a grant from the Clifford A. and Lillian C. Peeler Family Foundation.*

The truth is, I'm tired. And respite is hard to find. I don't want to sit on a hard church pew and be subjected to another parable about Jesus healing the sick, raising the dead, making the blind man see and the lame man walk.

Don't tell me again how lucky Camille is to have me as her mother and how one day I'll know what a blessing she is. I'm sick of all that. Instead, tell me a story about how the deaf man lived his whole life and never heard an owl's lonesome call outside his window at dusk, how the blind woman never saw a sunset through the mountain pines, and how the little girl grew up and was never able to tell her mother, "I love you." Tell me about miracles that never happened and how these people managed to find their faith in spite of it all. Tell me the truth that happens when hope disappears and there isn't anything left. Acknowledge my angry faith and don't promise me miracles of the flesh.

And so you can well imagine the joy, not long ago, when we began to notice a difference around our table at dinner. Our outstretched palms were open, waiting, as usual. And then, we noticed (eyes closed, heads bowed for grace) the ever-so-gentlest, light-as-duck-down, tentative touch. Like the seeds of a dandelion being blown across your palm. Like a glider touching down on a runway built only for 747s. Like—indeed, like what it was, the touch of small four year- old fingertips reaching across, daring to hold hands. A touch so imperceptible, you might not even have noticed—unless you'd been waiting for it as long as we had. So there it is, my faith. Imperceptible, filtering in by glacial degrees, taking me by surprise when I least expect it. Nothing much changes in the world, except that a small drop of possibility ripples out and keeps the next day coming."

At this time of year the aisles and the screens and the sounds of our lives tell us over and over that they have the answers. That we need to be happy. If we can just unlock the magic door we'll know what we need to know for everything to be okay.

But it's not. There is still violence and war and cancer and grief and bigotry. Families still argue and parenting answers can't be found in a book. Neither is it easy being a kid.

And you know. You know. No matter how perfect the gift. No matter how prettily it is wrapped. There is nothing that will be under the tree that can give life. That can provide happiness.

Theologians Walter Brueggemann and others, reflecting on this passage from Mark knowing when it would be read, write "Advent begins not on a note of joy, but of despair. Humankind has reached the end of its rope. All our schemes for self-improvement, for extricating ourselves from the traps we have set for ourselves, have come to nothing. We have now realized at the deepest level of our being that we cannot save ourselves and that, apart from the intervention of God, we are totally and irretrievably lost."

And there, there, in those few little words is the good news. The thing that can keep us fighting for justice and caring for the tender places in our worlds as well as our own hearts. The reminder that without God, we're lost. But we are not without God.

God came. Christ was born, Christ was risen, Christ will come again. We proclaim this truth this day and each Sunday when we gather. We will proclaim it in a moment when we gather to eat and drink at the table that gives us sustenance.

Poet Mary Oliver famously asked in one of her poems, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”<sup>3</sup>

If God cannot be domesticated and we are made in God’s image, then let’s remember that neither can we. And that with go, we can go upstream, against the grain, counter-cultural, proclaiming what is real joy in this season of anticipation, what is real truth as we begin the walk to Bethlehem.

We are not self-sufficient, we need God and we’ve got one another.

Let’s get ready for Jesus.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/search?q=mary%20oliver%20summer%20day>  
<https://soundcloud.com/onbeing/mary-oliver-the-story-behind>