

Advent Wisdom: Strength & Beauty

Paying Attention

Advent I

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Text: Mark 13

What would you think if you knew that for our 8th and 9th graders, part of their spiritual formation here at Hope Church involves staring at apples? And also required them looking out the window for 5 minutes to watch rain? Would you be scandalized that time is being wasted on such odd activities? Or would you be amazed that 8th and 9th graders can sit still and stare at anything for 5 minutes? Or are you simply curious as to why attention is being paid to apples and rain? I hope you can be curious – this was part of the GIFT class curriculum – Growing in Faith Together – and these activities were led by Rev. Mary VanAndel, as I called on her to delve into the realm of spirituality for a couple of weeks; Mary carries and shares a lot of wisdom about spirituality, and she explored some of that wisdom with our fine group of youths both at Mary & Ben’s Bethabara retreat center in Saugatuck and here at Hope Church.

Turns out when you watch rain for a while, it can be quite interesting – noticing differences between various rain drops, and the ways rain interacts with the surroundings, and the sound and even color of it – rain can seem downright intriguing and entertaining! Turns out when you stare at an apple or 2 on a table, you notice apples differently – peculiarities of shape, spectrums of color, imperfections, texture – and you might notice things in you, like hunger - you might even feel like you can taste it! – next time you eat an apple, you might just do so with a newfound appreciation. And when you’ve looked at rain and apples for a while, you may then be open to hearing something about spirituality – that it has to do with paying attention, with noticing, with being present to something in an intentional way – and you could start to think of spirituality as a way of paying attention to life, to yourself, to others, to God, to the world – and maybe even of God paying attention to us.

That's a lot from some rain and apples, but that's what you'll hear from Rev. Mary if you're in GIFT Class – and I think that's something of what we hear from Jesus in Mark 13 too – so it seems to me that both Mary and Jesus are in good company this day, and we with them. What Jesus says to pay attention to is a fig tree (makes those GIFT class activities sound quite biblical?!) – fig trees there were as common as apples tree here: Jesus says – “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.” That's it – that's all Jesus says about the fig tree – but I think there's a lot there – a lot partly because we need to see how this simple lesson Jesus shares is part of this broader passage we read which is not simple at all – the passage we heard in Mark is dramatic and cosmic and mysterious; but before we broaden to that we need to spend some time simply with the fig tree, as Jesus asks us to do. Jesus says that if you pay attention to a fig tree, it will tell you what time it is: ‘when the branches become tender and sprout leaves, then you know summer is near’ – we understand that...even though most of us are less connected these days to the natural world around us, we still know what it means to track the plants and weather and creatures around us that speak to the seasons of nature that impact our lives. And if you go just a bit deeper with this, when you pay attention to a fig tree, and to nature, you can realize that what you see did not simply happen just then, but that it is connected to a whole flow of events and time which are present in what we see now – those tendering branches and sprouting leaves not only point ahead to summer but contain in them the many seasons before from seed to shoot to roots to trunk and branches. When you look at the fig tree, it tells you both what is ahead and speaks to you of what has come before.

So, here's the question: are you willing to pay attention to a fig tree? – be careful how you answer – because once you do, the paying attention keeps going. But really, it is not a question from Jesus, it is a direction: teaching us that to follow our Lord is to be a part of keeping one's eyes and heart open in life – open to notice a fig tree and to pay attention to this whole dramatic world: it is a world Jesus describes of turmoil and confusion, of suffering and of powers shaken

– and a world too in which the winds of the Spirit are stirring, the cusp of God’s presence being revealed.

What does it mean to follow such teaching from Jesus? – something about keeping alert, awake, eyes open both to what is harmful and what is healing, both broken and whole, in this world, and as we do so, to use the wisdom of the fig tree to see it all as pointing to a kind of season:

- when I see the bitter leaves of violence and war continually blossoming, it tells me of the legacies of violence in which our ways are rooted, and points toward an addiction to violence continuing

- when I see story after story of mistreatment from men to women, it speaks to me of toxic patterns of relationship that have grown for too long, and sees more ahead if those branches are not pruned

- when I see branches of government putting forth policy that could further stratify wealth and opportunity, it tells me that whatever your analysis of such a policy, that I and you must pay attention to what fruit comes from such actions, and must speak if it leads to a season of injustice

- when I literally see leaves around me that stay on trees longer as this earth continues to warm, I must recognize the patterns that mistreat God’s creation, and speak to the seasons of harm that unfold when we are unwilling to change our actions.

And then there is this to see too:

- when I see leaves emerge of people of good will, different faiths and beliefs, coming together from a painful past to share their hopes and concerns, their pain and their kindness, I sense the stir of a season in which the Spirit is nurturing compassion and healing

- when I see the leaders of Latin Americans United for Progress, LAUP, meeting in our building to support young Hispanic leaders in addressing issues of justice and opportunity in our community, I see the reality of a flawed past being shaped into a different future

- when I see Peter Boogaart's picture receiving recognition for his work over many years on issues of sustainability for creation, I recognize someone who knows deeply the failures of the past yet who leads with a persistent vision of hope for God's creation

I'm not sure if you recognize what I'm getting at, but I wonder as I describe all these broken and healing branches in our world, if you do get a sense of just how much it all is – all the turmoil of this world. It is a lot to pay attention to – it is not easy – it is easier for us to turn away – it is easier for us to numb ourselves; it is a commitment, a faith, instead to take notice of what is happening around us, and within us too. Jesus says, pay attention – why? – because to do so is an act of love. That's what Rev. Mary taught us through rain and apples, that the commitment to pay attention brings love into the world. And how Jesus expresses that, is that in the midst of all the turmoil we are called to pay attention to, as we do so, what we also see is that the Spirit of God is at work – our eyes are opened to the coming of Jesus among us – we are renewed in the truth that God is paying attention – and act of love for this world – that we are not left alone, but are called by the one comes among us to claim this world with God's grace.

Sometimes when you pay attention to this world, that is hard to believe about God; and yet the only way to believe it IS to pay attention. That is our Advent call and commitment to be nurtured in at this table, that the presence of God's promise among us will nurture in us leaves of faith and hope and love – as we pay attention in an act of love for the brokenness and wholeness of the world you see, of the people you see, of the you that you see; as we are nurtured in the wisdom that the season into which we live is one in which the Lord is near. Thanks be to God. AMEN.