

Bruton Parish Episcopal Church
The Rev'd Dr. Daniel W. McClain, Associate Rector & Canterbury Chaplain
The First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2018

A Body's Grace

Theological Reflections on Living, Dying, and all the stuff in-between

It is difficult to pay attention and stay alert with all the stimuli competing for our attention. There's little wonder that we don't have much left when it comes to being aware and present. I know this only too well as a parent — my biggest frustration and weakness is screaming coming from the backseat.

Much of what distracts us seems innocuous enough at first: media of whatever form, busy schedules, you know the noise I'm talking about.

We all need help learning how to negotiate, and ultimately minimize, these things. But I wonder about those distractions that work on us at deeper, more existential level, like concerns about safety and well-being, and the future. Or how about that underlying awareness, just at the edge of consciousness that death and destruction, both at home and abroad, is constant, pervasive, and inevitable. It's so ubiquitous that we're (almost) numb to it. And yet it eats at us. It's a constant companion, the source of an underlying anxiety that colors our whole existence. And that anxiety, that ever present fear is a sign of our times.

So when you hear Jesus' words this morning, you may ask yourself if he's giving a rundown of the week's headlines. And you wouldn't be wrong to ask.

Jesus narrates for us a situation that sounds like more of the same catastrophe, tragedy, and heartache that too easily captures our common life today.

But Jesus and his followers were familiar with that feeling. Jesus lived in war torn and occupied territory. And in the years following his death and resurrection, Jesus' followers associated his words with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in the year 70.

Many of those same people were persecuted, tortured, and killed on account of their discipleship. Even today, Christians continue to be persecuted and killed, simply because they follow Jesus.

It's true that in this country we're lucky that there is very little chance that we'll be killed under such circumstances. So it might be hard for many of us to identify with that level of persecution, to put ourselves in a place where Jesus' words hit home. Yet we know something of that feeling, that nausea that comes with the overwhelm when we consider the inhumanity at work in so much of our news these days.

We are bound to struggle between our privileged situation and our human condition as we encounter Jesus, as we try to understand him and his teaching.

And Jesus seemed to know that this would be so. We hear him this morning telling his followers, us, to be alert and pray for strength. What can this mean for us? On this first morning of Advent, how can we make sense of his enigmatic and dramatic words?

Today's collect gets us on the right track, I think: Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Aren't we aware enough, Jesus? We watch the news, we discuss it on facebook and with our coworkers. We're constantly aware of the crises at work in our world. Aren't we already alert?

I wonder if that high alert in which we constantly find ourselves isn't what Jesus means when he instructs his followers to "be alert at all times." What could he mean?

Most of us experience Advent as a time of comfort: familiar music, romantic images of warm rooms through frosted glass, the glow of twinkling lights, and the tender images in our memories of loved ones. In our heads, we're already at Christmas morning.

But of course, this Christmas morning that we entertain in our hearts and in our expectations is not the actual Christmas morning that we will experience. It's an ideal Christmas morning, wherein everyone gets along, everyone is happy, the food is already cooked, and somehow plans are executed with precision while everyone remains carefree and at their ease. No arguing, no fuss, no distractions. Sheer enjoyment. It's a nice dream, isn't it?

But before Mary and Joseph can have the baby, before that baby's birth means what it needs to mean, there is heartache, there is catastrophe, there is anxiety, and there's simply too much of it for me to summarize here. But it's all there, and to such a degree that Israel cries out, Come, Come Immanuel. Set your captives free.

Let us not forget why Israel laments and cries out for God to uphold the promised savior. And let us not forget that that savior is also for us, for our lamentation, for our anxieties, for the darkneses that beset us and our world.

The savior is for us too, and we are right to call out to God as Israel did.

There is a reason, as our hymn reminds us, to rejoice. But it's not for what we've made Christmas. Israel rejoices because Immanuel will come. And we should rejoice that that savior will come again to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We should rejoice that Immanuel will free us of our illusions just as he liberates actual captives.

This is our diligence, this is our watch: that we should pray for God's grace in these dark and difficult times, darkness and difficulties that are often of our own devising.

We should pray not that we should muster up our own strength, but that Jesus would strengthen our hearts in holiness, not that we should lean on our righteousness and cunning, but that God should relieve our hearts and increase our love for him and for each other.

Amen

Pictured: The oldest surviving icon of Christ Pantokrator at Saint Catherine Monastery, Sinai, Egypt

