

I. Advanced organizer

- A. **My family has been recently going through a new season of Potter-mania.** It's gone in phases for the Martens. I read all of the Harry Potter books several years ago as the phenomenon was getting going. Then just a few years ago, our eldest Elliott was old enough to be interested, so I began reading the books with him, and Jason got in on the action, reading them all and watching the movies with us. And now our daughters have recently become fascinated with the Harry Potter universe alongside their cousins, and so once again, I've been reading aloud the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.
1. Going back and rereading these books I'm experience afresh, one of the parts that's the most entertaining about the series. How we as an audience are invited to discover and delight with young Harry as he becomes acquainted with a world he was unaware of: the magical universe in to which he was born but was raised apart from. This is where much of the imaginative joy of author J.K. Rowling's work lies, **describing a world that is much like our our own, but with supernatural elements hidden from our view.** A wall between two train platforms is the magical portal to find the Hogwarts Express. An ordinary looking pub called the Leaky Cauldron can lead you to a busy shopping district full of potions, magical creatures and wand shops, if you just know where to tap on the garden wall. Unlike magical universes like Middle Earth that are entirely different then the world we exist in, **the wizarding world inhabits many of the same spaces as us muggles, just hidden from view.** As Harry is introduced more and more into this wizarding world not that far from the one he's always known, Harry begins to understand that magic has always surrounded him, he just couldn't always see it or understand it. When he receives the invitation to Hogwarts it's the beginning of a journey to discover what's been around him and even within him but hidden to his view. He thought himself an ordinary, uninteresting, unappreciated boy in an ordinary unmagical world. But **as Harry soon learns, there's more to his story.**
- B. Today is the first Sunday in the season of Advent; a season that much of the church has historically marked over the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. A Season of preparation, of waiting.
1. **"Advent" comes from the Latin word *adventus* which means "coming".** We are attentive to Jesus's coming in the world.
 2. To truly embody the Spirit of Advent means we don't skip to the Christmas feast. We don't fast forward to the manger and the angels and the celebration. We journey as we experience Christ's coming. We reflect. We consider the longing in the world that Jesus came to. The depth of the darkness in which the light dawned. We consider where our own longing lies, where darkness around us remains.
 3. Our culture woos us to skip the longing. Some stores put their Christmas trees on sale even before Halloween. The music is playing around us, lights are hung on our streets, and our calendars may be filling with Holiday celebrations, we're doing some of that with Haven this month.
 4. I'm not trying to say we're wrong to participate in that. But if we focus solely on the feast, the celebration, the cultural traditions that have arisen around this winter Holiday, much of which has little attachment to the life of Jesus, we might miss an important opportunity to receive some of the gifts of this season, some of the gifts of Jesus coming not just once upon a time, but here and now.
- C. So we're gonna take some time when we're together over the next month to mark the season, to take the journey together, to observe, to puzzle, to wait, and yes, to celebrate. And my hope is that as we journey together through the winding path of anticipating Jesus's coming,

we'll have experiences of receiving the gift of God's care for us at Christmas all the more sweetly.

1. As we do this, I thought that, **in the spirit of entering into a church tradition that is bigger than our little community with Advent, it might be interesting for our two regular Sunday teachings this Advent to look together at the Bible texts from the lectionary.**
 - a) **The lectionary is a schedule of readings that most liturgical churches (mainline denominations, and so on) traditionally preach from.** I've never preached through the lectionary. Generally, I appreciate the freedom and flexibility that preaching in series like we do affords.
 - b) But there's also a wisdom in having an invitation to look at texts that might not be top of mind or the most comfortable for you to consider. And I think particularly when we're entering into a season like Advent, when we're looking to participate in practices that go beyond our local community and try to gather some of the insight from our brothers and sisters of other Jesus-centered traditions, I thought I might make sense to consider the same passages that our brothers and sisters around the world are studying; to enter into a bigger conversation and hear how it speaks to us.
2. **What I found when I began to research how other churches who follow the lectionary observe advent was new to me.** Perhaps it's not to some of you who may have spent more time in lectionary settings, but it was to me. The lectionary doesn't have you start at the beginning of the nativity story. It doesn't have you start with an announcement of a miraculous conception, either Jesus' or his cousin John's.
 - a) **Instead it starts with Jesus himself, not the baby - but the grown up, in the last days of his life.** We're gonna look at the story, and for context, I'm gonna start it a bit before the traditional passage, so we get some of the set-up, and then we'll move to the main text.

II. Luke 21.

- A. Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box. 2 He also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. 4 For they all offered their gifts out of their wealth. But she, out of her poverty, put in everything she had to live on."**

5 Now while some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and offerings, Jesus said, 6 "As for these things that you are gazing at, the days will come when not one stone will be left on another. All will be torn down!" 7 So they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that these things are about to take place?" 8 He said, "Watch out that you are not misled. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them! 9 And when you hear of wars and rebellions, do not be afraid. For these things must happen first, but the end will not come at once."...

1. then Jesus speaks about the disciples themselves experiencing persecution on account of their faith, pretty grim stuff. And then he describes the destruction of the temple they are looking at:

- B. 20 "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 21 Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Those who are inside the city must depart. Those who are out in the country must not enter it, 22 because these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. 23 Woe to those**

who are pregnant and to those who are nursing their babies in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people. 24 They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led away as captives among all nations. Jerusalem will be trampled down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

1. And then starts the lectionary text itself, where Luke describes Jesus saying this:

- C. **25 “And there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars, and on the earth nations will be in distress, anxious over the roaring of the sea and the surging waves. 26 People will be fainting from fear and from the expectation of what is coming on the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see the Son of Man arriving in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 But when these things begin to happen, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”**

29 Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the other trees. 30 When they sprout leaves, you see for yourselves and know that summer is now near. 31 So also you, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

34 “But be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day close down upon you suddenly like a trap. 35 For it will overtake all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 But stay alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that must happen, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

1. So...Eggnog, anyone?

- a) This may not feel like a particularly festive text; **it might even feel downright freaky**, more like Halloween than Christmas. But I think, if we press through that initial discomfort we might feel with a text like this, there may be something profoundly helpful in it.
- b) So I’m gonna name upfront that besides what can seem like dark imagery that Jesus is using here, **one of the reasons this passage might make us uncomfortable is that we may have heard people use texts like this to try to frighten and even manipulate people into certain faith practices or beliefs**, sometimes even with declarative predictions about how and when Jesus will come back riding on clouds and how the universe as we know it is going to end. And I think we’re right for that to make us feel a bit uncomfortable.
- c) But just because people have used Jesus words in ways that make us unsettled, even triggered, doesn’t mean that the words themselves don’t have something important for us, so I’m gonna **acknowledge what might be some baggage for some of us around a text like this and then see if we can lay some of that baggage aside and receive something fresh and life-giving from this story.**

- D. **So what is Jesus talking about here? One word that comes to mind is “apocalypse”.** And this is appropriate, this is important. Jesus does seem to be using apocalyptic language, but that may not actually mean what many of us commonly think it means.

1. **When many of us here the word “apocalypse” we think of destruction**, we think of violence, we think of a cataclysmic event that is the end of things. That’s come to be how it’s commonly used today. But that’s not actually what the word historically meant.

2. **“Apocalypse” comes to us from the Greek word *apokalypsis***, which, rather than being a word about destruction or violence, is actually about **unveiling or revealing something**. “Unmasking” is another word you could use. An apocalypse was a revelation, something that was hidden being made more clear. An apocalypse says you may think you know this story, but there’s more going on here than you see. Maybe there’s a magical universe hidden in plain view that you were never aware of. There’s more to the story.
 3. **This is connected to an ancient genre of literature that was called apocalyptic literature.** The most famous examples of this genre are in the book of **Daniel in the Hebrew Bible** and the book of **Revelation in the New Testament**, but those aren’t the only places we see in the Bible where there are apocalyptic passages. Jesus seems to be drawing on that tradition here, so it’s important to understand a little about what the tradition is and what it’s meant to communicate.
 4. Here are a few characteristics that are generally true of ancient apocalyptic literature, including our texts in the Bible:
 - a) **Heavy use of symbolic imagery.** This is one of the things that makes interpreting apocalyptic texts particularly tricky: **it’s part of the genre is to use highly dramatic symbolism to communicate a vision of what will be revealed or unveiled.** The book of Daniel includes images of wild beasts in violent conflict with the Ancient of Days, the one imagined to be the Divine, alongside what was described as “one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven.” This is clearly the image Jesus is drawing on in our passage, referencing Daniel, but what he’s using this symbol to refer to may not be clear on the surface.
 - b) **Another thing that makes these passages challenges is that events are often described through prediction.** The authors seem to be speaking prophetically in some way of things that are to come. But most Biblical scholars think **these passages are actually saying more about the immediate circumstances and what will soon be unveiled there then some time far off in the distance.** Again, it’s a genre that uses symbolism to unmask. Daniel’s four beasts are generally understood to be four rival kingdoms that Israel was struggling with and being oppressed by. Many scholars believe that the Book of Revelation tells us more about the political upheaval that the early church was facing in their time and how they were to understand it and find God in it, then literal events we’d see in the distant future. There is a sense in which these predictions through sometimes bizarre symbolism seek to reveal a deeper truth of what is happening and coming. And they often have to do with the toppling of unjust powers.
 - c) **Apocalyptic literature calls out injustice, often from the perspective of the oppressed.** It says, “These structures of unjust power you assume are eternal because they’re all you can see...these are finite. God is moving through history to topple unjust empires and usher in a different kind of way of being together. Let’s reclaim political language and call it “Kingdom of God”.
 5. With all that in mind as background, let’s take a closer look at our passage.
- E. I included the set-up because I think it **gives us some important context for what Jesus is naming here.**
1. The chapter begins with Jesus noticing **the vast disparity between various folks who are dropping their gifts into the offering box in the temple.** I’ve preached on this incident before, and I’ve pointed out that often this passage tends to be looked at simply as Jesus praising the faith of the widow who gives everything she has to the temple. But I

believe that's missing an important piece of the puzzle. **Jesus is also lamenting a system that would exploit this woman's generosity. A system that is set up to enable such vast economic inequality.** A system that is corrupt and would have this poor widow believe that giving all of her resources so that the stones of the temple can be beautiful is God's plan for her. The incident is connected to everything that follows.

2. **We go from Jesus pointing out the gross inequality** between those who drop sums of money that barely make a dent on their bottom line, and a woman who gives her meager coins when it's all she has, **to Jesus' disciples marveling at the impressive magnificence of the temple building itself.** Look at these fancy stones. Look at the craftsmanship. Look at the sheer size of the place.
 - a) Perhaps you've found yourself in a similar place, taking in the magnificence of an impressive building. There are a lot of them around here. We live in an area where companies are currently spending vast amounts of money on their headquarters - the Googelplex, the Apple Spaceship, the Salesforce tower. All of these are more than utilitarian, they do more than just provide office space. They communicate strength, prestige, power.
 - b) One Biblical scholar I read suggested that **perhaps the disciples were so interested in the building because they genuinely believed that they were taking it over.** This was gonna be their cool headquarters soon. And it makes sense why they'd think that. Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, emblematic of a coming anointed leader. He's cleared the temple of the corrupt money changers. He's preaching and healing here in the temple courts. In their understanding, their fledgling start-up is about to go big. They are about to acquire a multi-billion dollar company. And Jesus' response to them, is "Guys, don't get attached. All of this is coming down."
 - c) **He's popping the bubble.** He's shattering the pipe dream, he is waking them up and unmasking the truth. This thing you are in awe of, this is unjust, it is built on the back of impoverished widows. And because of that it is antithetical to the way of God. It cannot stand. There is more to this story. All will be torn down."
 - d) Jesus makes clear that **this corrupt temple system is not sustainable, and it wasn't.** About thirty five years after Jesus spoke these words, the Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem, for months Jerusalem was under siege, until the Jewish defenses broke down and the Romans made their way into the heart of the city. Their future Emperor Titus led the charge, heading toward the temple with the hopes of claiming it for his own and repurposing it as a temple to the Roman Emperor and the Roman gods, but as they attacked a fire broke out and was soon out of control, destroying the temple and much of the city with it. It was, as they say, "apocalyptic".
 - e) **Jesus called it. He saw it coming. He knew that there would be a downfall and that it would be costly,** it would be painful, not just for the corrupt leaders who were most invested in and responsible for the system, but for the innocents who simply were in the wrong place at the wrong time, as well.

F. But **Jesus knew something else, something that I think is really at the heart of the lectionary text today.**

1. Jesus knew that **when the faithful and vulnerable suffer,** when those who've been oppressed are caught up in the collateral damage of the empire's downfall, when it feels that the foundations of the earth are coming apart at the seams because the most deeply entrenched structures of power are failing - **that is when the Divine is drawing near. Yes,**

there is grief and fear and loss, but there is also the Eternal God showing up for those who are caught in all of it, if they can perceive this one who is on their side.

2. **Jesus reaches for this image that Daniel had in his vision, an image of one like a son of man coming clouds to describe the clarity he's trying to communicate.** He often used that image of himself, calling himself "the son of man". I hear him saying as he does so, **"I am your cosmic deliverer. I am the one who shows up when all seems to be lost. I am the one who stands with the broken in times of despair."** If he lived in another time or place he might have said, "I am the knight on the white horse." "I am the mama bear who will not leave her cub alone to be destroyed." "I am the great Jedi warrior, or I am the Great Wizard Dumbledore." But he uses Daniel's language because he knows what it means to those he speaks to when he describes "a son of man coming on the clouds."
3. Brian McLaren and other Biblical scholars point out **another provocative resonance of this term "son of man"**. The "son of" something can also be understood to mean "a new generation" of it. And "man" can also be understood to be "humanity". **Another way one could hear this term "son of man" is a new generation of humanity is coming in the wake of calamity.** Jesus may not have only been using this imagery of Daniel's to point to himself as a deliverer, but to the body of people he was commissioning to accompany him in that work. A new generation of mankind to show up where deliverance is needed.
4. McLaren elaborates in this way: *"To apply these words to our contemporary context, we could say this: as racists increase their virulence, a new generation of humanity is emerging, humanity that doesn't fear difference but sees it as a sign of strength. As we witness a morally repulsive resurgence of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, we also witness a new generation of humanity that is building a movement of multi-faith solidarity. As resentful and frightened people use immigrants as a scapegoat, a new generation of humanity is emerging that cares about immigrants and works to protect them from further abuse. And as the wealthy and powerful hoard more wealth and power, a new generation of humanity is being activated to care for the poor and too-often forgotten."*
5. **We live in an apocalyptic age when we are forced to confront evils that have long been with us but sometimes cleverly hidden from view.** But with the unmasking we've all experienced in recent years, also comes the rise of a new humanity, tasked to bring deliverance.

G. Now, let me be clear because by this point, you might be wondering this: **I'm not gonna make a call on whether or not Jesus believed or expects us to believe in a literal moment when somehow all over our round planet we all see at exactly the same moment someone who looks like a human male riding clouds and descending from the sky.**

1. I'm not gonna make a call on that, because I don't actually think that's the point of this passage. In the same way that I don't think Genesis 1 and 2 are written to explain how planets are formed or cells divide, I don't think ultimately that this text is about Jesus trying to tell us how the world is going to end.
2. **I do think he's trying to tell us that we need to remember that so often the world we are invested in, that we see as eternal, is finite.** The systems we're invested in - the religious systems, the government systems, the capitalist systems - none of them are eternal.
3. **But the Divine heart is, and the Divine is moving throughout history to bring greater equity and restoration to all creation.** Mama God is moving to redeem her creation.

Jesus is embodying that work, and is commissioning a community of people to embody it with him. **I don't know exactly what the decisive end to the story will be**, or if there will be one that we can even imagine in any meaningful way, but I do know that through passages like this, Jesus seemed to be calling his followers to pay attention, to look out, to lift their heads and be alert for the signs of divine presence in the face of destruction.

You may only see calamity, but this is really an apocalypse. This is an unveiling.

Notice the signs. There's more to the story.

III. This brings us to the little parable, which holds I think an invitation for all of us this Advent season.

A. "Look at the fig tree and all the other trees. When they sprout leaves, you see for yourselves and know that summer is now near. So also you, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near."

1. **Jesus is naming that in these seasons of unveiling**, when truth is coming to light, **when unjust systems are being revealed, there is also evidence of new life, of the presence of the divine, of God's alternative kingdom. But you have to pay attention.** You have to be alert. **You have to notice the signs**, like the budding leaves on a tree. Otherwise you may miss the kingdom coming all around you.
2. **How do you miss the signs?** You miss them from not being attentive. You're not looking at the tree, you've got other things to do.
 - a) **Perhaps you're numbing the pain of the unveiling** - Jesus points to folks doing that through dissipation and drunkenness; squandering your time and resources through alcohol, drugs, sex, spending, Netflix. Pick your poison, any of them can be. I'm not saying any of these are dangerous in and of themselves but when they become a tool we use to dull the fear or the grief we feel, **they also dull our other senses too. They dull our sight from noticing the signs.**
 - b) There's another way Jesus mentions we may miss the signs. **He calls it the worries of this life.** Some of us don't respond to fear with numbing, **we respond with activity. Too much activity.** We throw ourselves into work. We try to become our own saviors. We strive to fix the problem in front of us through increased work, through greater activism, through gaining more and more information that we hope will hold the key to our salvation. And though all of those practices can be beneficial they also can fall short in their capacity to bring life if they keep us too distracted. If they cause us to miss the forest for the trees. If we forget there's more to the story.

B. Jesus knows his followers feel fear. He can hear it in their voices as they ask "when's all this gonna happen? How will we know?" **Fear is natural in the face of change, in the face of unraveling, in the face of suffering. But Jesus is also speaking hope to them.** Yes, there's going to be scary times. I can't shield you from that. But if you pay attention, if you are alert, if you pray and invite the presence of God to be close to you, to help you read the signs, even in the moment of suffering, even in the unveiling, you will not be alone. You need not be consumed by fear. You can stand before the Son of Man.

1. I don't know about you, but **this is a message I need to hear and receive and experience in the depth of my being this Advent season.** And perhaps this is where we must start Advent because otherwise this season can become just another means of numbing the pain. This season between Thanksgiving and January can become a nostalgic drug that we take every December to forget for a moment how heartbreaking the year was, how disappointing, how grievous, things have felt. But when we do that, when we simply put on the band-aid of Christmas and skip to the feast and the manger, we may

miss not only the pain of unveiling we've seen this year, but also the beauty, the joy, the magic we felt too.

2. One example of how I've seen this this year.

- a) Last week I alluded to **the crisis my family has been going through in these last couple of months as my sister Mandy has been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer.** This experience has been a place where up close my family has been asked to look at the injustice of illness as it has been unveiled in our presence. And yet in that painful unveiling, there have also been signs of divine presence, signs of God's loving, redeeming kingdom coming. Signs like leaves on the tree, testifying to God coming near.
- b) One of these took place the week Mandy was diagnosed. I was with our friend Ginny on a personal prayer retreat at a Catholic retreat center nearby. And I went into the retreat knowing that my sister may be seriously ill. She's had enough tests for us to be worried, but we didn't have the results. So on this retreat, I spent time processing and praying with Ginny throughout the day. And then in one of my times of silent prayer, while Ginny, unbeknownst to me was praying in the next room for me to have an experience that would be helpful in regards to what was happening with Mandy, I had a powerful vision in prayer. Picture of God as a mother brushing my sister's hair, tenderly caring for her in this nurturing way. Anointing her with something that released power and light. Turned out to be the mother's tears. The mother was weeping over her but her tears brought Mandy comfort, strength, and healing.
- c) Shared the picture with my sister over text. She had just received the news that she had cancer. Picture was extremely meaningful to her. A few weeks later she had me share it in her spiritual community...

C. So this is my invitation to you as we end: I invite you to be attentive and reflective this Advent season. I invite you to notice the fig leaves budding on the trees. And throughout the next few weeks I'm inviting each of us to note those leaves, to write them down, to put them on our tree here, so this Advent we can find ourselves not numbed, or too busy to notice, but alive to the real hope of the son of man drawing close. May we lift our heads and find the ways in which our redemption is near. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

- 1. Have you had experiences of "apocalypse" in your life, where realities have been unveiled that you couldn't see before? What was that like for you? What were the effects of it?
- 2. What systems in our time might be moving towards an "apocalypse"? How do you see that affecting you or others around you?
- 3. What "fig leaves" have been evident in your life this year? Where have you seen signs of God's presence, even potentially in the midst of unveiling? What patterns or habits might keep you from noticing the signs?