

The Art of Paying Attention: Finding Hope in Dark Times

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[0 : 00] All right, so we're going to be talking about the art of paying attention today. The art of paying attention. Does anybody get the screen time reports on their phone, like from Apple?

Because you want to feel bad. I almost had, almost, it was this close to a perfect score last week. 23 hours and 59 minutes per day. That's what the report said. Thank you. Thank you.

It's a lot of work. There's clearly a bug. It says, like, my password app runs all day long, which is, I'm not that secure in my, the way I use my password. So we, as Aislinn introduced earlier during our prayer time, we, today is actually Happy New Year.

Happy New Liturgical Year. Yeah. This is the first week and the first day of Advent. And the Table Church doesn't sort of, like, officially follow the liturgical calendar.

But I've had a big love for it ever since I was introduced to it in college. And the, the liturgical calendar is something that's been practiced by most Christians in most places at most times.

[1 : 08] It began to be sort of rebelled against by the Anabaptists during the Reformation. And that sort of spread into the Baptist movement, which then spread into America and then sort of the non-denominational movement.

But most Christians, not just Catholics, but your Presbyterians and your Episcopalians and your Methodists, they follow a liturgical calendar, which is cyclical.

And it runs, like, within the same 365 days as the secular calendar. But it follows more predictable cycles of the Christian year and the big seasons or events of the Christian year.

So we are at the very beginning of the calendar here at Advent, which is all about anticipation and hope. And it's remembering the coming of Jesus 2,000 years ago.

It's also looking forward to some sort of triumphal return, setting things right. You move into Advent, into Christmas proper, which is when we remember and celebrate the incarnation of Jesus.

[2 : 14] And so the 12 days of Christmas refer to Christmas Day and following. Okay. Then that leads to Epiphany, which is rooted in the event of the Magi visiting Jesus.

And this idea of revelation, that God's light has broken into the world, not just for Israel and Judea, but for all nations. And then you move into Lent, which is when we remember the crucifixion, Christ's death, season of preparation and repentance.

And death moves into Easter, which then moves into Pentecost, remembering the Holy Spirit. And then most of the year is this ordinary time. And ordinary is sort of a play on words in English.

Ordinary meaning like the ordinal numbers, just the counting of days. As well as the fact that much of the time is ordinary. It's mundane. And yet it's the belief that God gives us time as a gift.

And the idea that time does follow in some forms of cycles. If you were a farmer, you know the cycles very well, but most of us aren't farmers anymore.

[3 : 19] And so it's this reminder of the cycles of death and resurrection and anticipation and climax and all of these themes that show up in our scriptures.

So I've loved being rooted in this for a long time as a way of sort of rebelling against our culture's constant obsession with progress. And rather being in a cycle of remembrance, of anticipation and release.

So we're in Advent. Advent simply means arrival or coming. And it is a season filled with expectation and hope. And I don't know about you, but I need some hope right now.

And today's passage is assigned from a liturgical calendar of scripture readings. And so tonight's gospel reading is from the Gospel of Luke chapter 21.

The words will not be on the screen. So if you want to follow along on your phones or in Luke chapter 21, I'll be reading from the Common English Translation. But you're welcome to follow along in any translation that you like.

[4 : 27] If you pick the King James, we can fight later. And a lot of the scripture readings for Advent may be surprising for some of us because you may be expecting your classic Christmas readings.

But the Christmas readings usually don't come until later. They don't come until Christmas Eve, Christmas and the 12 days of Christmas. The readings that lead up to Christmas are all about a different form of expectation.

And so we're talking about a passage that often gets associated with the return of Jesus. And we'll challenge that in a minute. The return of Jesus and the end of the world. And so we're going to talk about that, unpack that, and then talk about what it means to pay attention in the midst of it all.

So again, Luke chapter 21, starting in verse 25. These are the words of Jesus. Jesus says to his disciples, Then Jesus told them a parable.

Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God's kingdom is near.

[6 : 13] I assure you that this generation, Jesus is talking to a group of people in around 30, 33 CE, This generation won't pass away until everything has happened.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away. Take care that your hearts aren't dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life.

Don't let that day fall upon you unexpectedly like a trap. It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth. Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand before the human one.

God, we thank you for the gift of Scripture. We pray that your Holy Spirit would be in this place and illumine our eyes and our hearts and our ears to hear it and to understand it.

Not just to hear it, God, but to be doers of it as well. As we mingle together all these stories into one room, stories of joy and despair, joys of hope and broken hearts, stories of healing and stories of hurt.

[7 : 24] God, we know that you will do something good in our midst. May this sermon play some role in that, we pray. Amen.

Amen. Now, I hold an opinion. I'm not the only one to hold this opinion. I learned it from others. But it is a slightly controversial opinion that Jesus did not at all, during his ministry on earth, did not talk about his second coming.

Now, for any of us who grew up in the church hearing stories about being ready, being prepared for the second coming, hearing that Jesus didn't talk about it at all might be a little surprising or confusing.

Now, that is not the same as my saying that I don't believe in a second coming. I do. And it's not the same as saying as I don't believe that scripture talks about a second coming. I believe it does. But Jesus had a hard enough time getting his disciples to understand his first coming that I don't think he spent any time trying to confuse them further with a second one.

Now, that's not to say that Jesus didn't play a prophetic role. I think he did. And I think the prophetic role that Jesus was offering to his disciples and to the people of his time was about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem.

[8 : 38] Jerusalem was the capital city of Israel. It was not only its Washington, D.C., but it was also its St. Peter's Basilica.

It was the religious. It was the social. It was the political. It was the cultural capital of this people. And so when Jesus comes and starts saying things like, every stone will be unturned in this temple, that this, he comes to Jerusalem and as he stands near its walls, he weeps and says, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, oh, that you knew the things that made for peace, but soon the siege works and the ramparts will be upon you and will be your destruction.

Jesus is shocking and dismaying those around him. Look at verses 6 and 7 earlier. Jesus is answering a question from his disciples about the temple.

The disciples are looking around, admiring the temple, and Jesus says, yeah, it may be impressive, and it's all going to be destroyed. And the disciples ask, when? And Jesus starts answering that question.

He doesn't start answering a question about what the future is going to be like in 2,000 years. He doesn't start answering a question about when he will return. He starts answering the question, when will the temple be destroyed?

[9 : 55] Now, as soon as you turn over from Luke into Acts, sort of Luke part 2, Acts affirms that Jesus will return, that there is a second coming, what the New Testament calls the parousia, the royal coming of the king.

But Jesus himself did not talk about it. Jesus is talking about something that would happen within a generation. Jesus says, all the things that I'm talking to you about, they're going to happen within a generation.

And lots of Bible scholars have tried to pair this with like, well, either Jesus was wrong because it didn't happen in a generation, or you have to sort of bend it to be like, all these things will happen in a single generation, but that generation is in the future sometime.

But that's not what Jesus says. He says, the things I'm talking to you about will be done within a generation, which is true. The disciples who are there with Jesus listening to him will hear about, or live through, or experience the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

We have the historical record, the general Titus marching up, besieging the city, and then tearing it down. So then the question comes up, why are we as Christians, or at least people who are hearing a sermon about this passage, care?

[11 : 08] Why do we care? Why do we study it? Why did somebody bother to write it down or put it into a Bible if it was just something about something that happened 1,970 years ago or so?

So I think there are two faulty ways that we can deal with scriptural prophecy. The first faulty way is to use it as sort of future forecasting, future foretelling.

And I think this is a fool's business. Just this week, a gentleman named Hal Lindsey passed away, and Hal Lindsey was famous for his book in the 70s called The Late Great Planet Earth. Anybody read or know The Late Great Planet Earth?

Yeah, raise those hands for out. There you go, Allie. I see you. I see you. And The Late Great Planet Earth, and Hal Lindsey and many of his ilk went through, like, this great, very profitable career of naming the day that Jesus would return.

There was books like, what was it, 1,999 Reasons Jesus Will Return in 1999, and that didn't work. So he wrote a sequel, 2,000 Reasons Why Jesus Will Return in 2000. This was Hal Lindsey. It was somebody else.

[12 : 10] And, like, it's a great way to sell books. It's also a great way to look stupid when the time doesn't come. So you can use the Bible as future forecasting foretelling, but it often doesn't work very well.

Or you can just dismiss it as merely entirely about the past, and it has nothing to do about today. I think both of those approaches are mistaken. Who saw Wicked this past week?

Yeah, yeah. Who loved Wicked this past week? You go ahead and throw that tweet or thread or blue sky thing up on the screen. No, not that one. It's, like, it should be a screenshot.

There we go. This is my Priscilla writes. She said, Now, when Gregory Maguire wrote his weird little novel in 1995 called Wicked, or Stephen Schwartz put together his musical in the early 2000s, did they have in mind today's current political situation?

Of course not. Unless they do have some sort of prophetic foretelling powers, they couldn't have. But is a story about a weak man deceiving a nation into believing that some person or some people group is their enemy a tale as old as time?

[13 : 43] Of course it is. It is continually relevant. And when Jesus was warning about the destruction of Jerusalem, did he have in mind some other world-ending events?

Maybe, maybe not. And yet there is a continual, sort of predictable cycle of the rise and fall of empires, religions, and cultures.

Of course there is. Now, it makes as much sense to use the screenplay of Wicked to predict the future. You know, throw some water on a green woman and that will bring down the empire.

Like, no. It makes as much sense to do that as it does to use Luke 21 in the same way. To use it as a sort of predicting, foretelling, sort of biblical prophecy. But I do think it makes sense to use it to help us to pay attention to the past and the cycles that have happened before and the cycles that we find ourselves caught in.

Because there is always a story about a violent empire who is wanting to tear a culture or people down. And Jesus' message is that of peace, of shalom, of not trying to match power with the empire because you can't tear down the empire's house using the empire's rules, to mingle a quote.

[15:05] Jesus' message is one, rather, of shalom, of subversive peace, one that's willing to stand in front of your enemy and to turn the other cheek, not as a sign of weakness, but as a sign of standing up for yourself.

Which, of course, this brings us all back to the liturgical calendar. That it's never the wrong time to pay attention and to watch out and to stay alert and to know the ways that make for peace, as Jesus says.

Which brings us to today's theme of paying attention, which is something that Jesus repeats in this passage. There will be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars and on the earth.

And there's going to be confusion among the nations because of what happens in the sea and the surging ways. Look at the fig tree. Look at the trees. Take care that your hearts aren't dulled. Don't let that day fall upon you unexpectedly like a trap.

But stay alert at all times. And we buy some resources to sort of help us shape our sermons, particularly during the liturgical year, like Advent.

[16:14] So just so you know, they don't give us scripts. They just say, like, maybe go in this direction. Okay? And so this direction that our resources pointed it towards was this idea of paying attention.

And we have some devotionals out on the counter. We're going to email out the digital version tomorrow. And it's using the poetry of Mary Oliver as a way to sort of sharpen our senses in this season of expectation.

And specifically, it points us towards a poem by Mary Oliver called Yes, No. So here it is. It says, How necessary it is to have opinions.

I think the spotted trout lilies are satisfied, standing a few inches above the earth. I think serenity is not something you just find in the world like a plum tree holding up its white petals.

The violets along the river are opening their blue faces like small, dark lanterns. The green mosses, being so many, are as good as brawny.

[17:16] How important it is to walk along, not in haste, but slowly, looking at everything and calling out, Yes! No!

The swan, for all his pomp, his robes of grass and petals, wants only to be allowed to live on the nameless pond. The cat briar is without fault.

The water thrushes down among the sloppy rocks are going crazy with happiness. Imagination is better than a sharp instrument. To pay attention.

This is our endless and proper work. The work and the art of paying attention is one that is being further and further lost.

An economy that is all about buying our attention at all costs. Every vibration in our pockets and on our wrists and every flashing screen before our eyes, every sound we hear is a bid for our attention.

[18:21] And some of the most rebellious work that we can do in this culture is to say no to some things and yes to others. Writer William James says the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character, and will.

When I think about a story of someone paying attention in my life, and I've told bits of my story over the years. I was put into the foster system at the age of seven. And the way that that happened was by somebody paying attention.

So my biological mother, Toni, and I had driven up to Seward, Alaska. And Toni was trying to make her way to Cairo, Egypt, to fulfill a delusion that she could drive there and become a nurse for some reason.

This is part of her mental illness that sort of drove her to do this and for us to live in our car for a couple months. So we're in Seward, Alaska, in a car that she had inherited from my late grandmother.

And she had pulled into a gas station, a Texaco, a Chevron. And she proceeds to put oil in the gas tank and gas in the oil tank.

[19:39] This is not a good idea. Please do not do this. And the car, of course, like as it drives out of the gas station, it dies and we're eventually taken in by a family.

But the person whose name I will never know, whose story I won't ever fully know, at least this side of heaven, is the gas station attendant who watched this happen, who was paying attention to a slightly deranged woman and her emaciated son as she does this wild action of putting the wrong fluids in the wrong places in a car, who then calls up the authorities.

And finally, after seven years of my being abused and neglected by a person who had really no business being a parent anymore, finally put into protective custody.

And I think about that gas station attendant. There are, you know, among the jobs that sort of get harped on or joked about, we joke about gas station attendants and, you know, the sort of low labor that that is.

And yet this person managed to pay attention long enough to be a moment in my story to prevent it from what was likely a certain death because of my health condition and move it towards life.

[20 : 57] Paying attention, as we were reminded by Mr. Rogers, is the art of when there is some tragedy, look for the helpers. Because every tragedy has helpers.

Paying attention is to watch out for those who need help and those who will help us. Paying attention to the beauty all around us. Jesus invites us to pay attention to things as humble as a fig tree and as high and mighty as the sun and the moon and the stars because they're pointing at something.

They're pointing at the endless cycle of the ages, that there is danger and disaster coming, and also there's a way out. I've been on a Tolkien kick, J.R.R. Tolkien, author of Lord of the Rings, most of the year.

And so you're getting more than your fair share of Tolkien quotes in my sermons this year. But this is one that has always struck me. It's when Sam and Frodo are getting close to the fortress of the enemy.

And Sam in particular is filled with despair as he watches his master Frodo sort of fall to the shadow. And it says that he looks up far above the Ephraim duath in the west.

[22 : 12] The night sky was still and dim and pale. And there, peeping among the cloud rack above a dark tor, it's a mountain. High up in the mountains, Sam saw a bright star twinkle for a while.

And the beauty of it smote his heart as he looked up out of the forsaken land. And hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end, the shadow was only a small and passing thing.

There was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach. And so I wonder, I ask, I challenge us, what might the Spirit be asking us to pay attention to this week and during these four weeks of Advent?

What beauty and what kindness, what repetitive cycles of oppression and empire are repeating the steps of their march? In what ways can we break in with the dance steps of freedom?

Steps that were made by those who came long before us? And steps that will be danced by those who come after, if we teach them, if we pay attention.

[23 : 22] Would you pray with me? God, I thank you for the words of Jesus. Words that had a moment in their time to teach and warn about a specific thing, and yet also words that resonate into our day now.

God, I pray that we would be, our senses would be heightened by your power and your mercy and your grace. To pay attention.

To know the signs of the times. To know that in the end, evil is thoughtless and repetitive and predictable. And also, so is your mercy.

It is also predictable. It is also new every morning. It is also something that we can count on. And so, God, we pray for your redemption to break through like starlight in the heavens.

And we pray that we might have eyes to see and ears to hear, God. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.