

“When Noticing Leads to Finding”
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Luke 21:25-36
“Find Joy This Christmas” – Week One

The overarching theme for Advent and Christmastide this year is “Find Joy This Christmas,” four words that we will see show up in all kind of places. On this first Sunday of Advent, we begin at the beginning, with the word “find.” And the point I want to attempt to make before we dedicate our promises and pledges and then move to the Lord’s Table is this: we have the best chance of finding when we are intentional about “noticing.”

Have you noticed that it is easier to notice what is breaking down than what is emerging? The Morning Prayer group on Tuesday re-read a reflection we saved from 2015, and Kayla McClurg’s words sound more relevant than ever. “The earth in distress, we notice. Nations confused and in turmoil, we notice. People “fainting from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world,” well, we notice. But we more often than not, we more often fail to see the tiny signs of renewal, the little lights searching for us from faraway places. McClurg was thinking about how a community bands together after a storm – or think how people get together to add screens to an already completed bridge, so that our teenagers stop jumping from it! It is just harder, I guess, to see shoots of green rising up from the soil of pain and loss and disappointment.

Look, I’m not being critical, even Jesus, some two thousand years ago, spoke of how easy it is to notice what is breaking down. But the real message of today’s reading comes at his invitation to “Look at the fig tree sprouting leaves.” And admit it, it is harder to stay on task at noticing something as common and plain as a fig tree. Commentators tell us that the fig tree is the most common of trees. But, oh, they are durable and hardy, with roots that run deep; it can produce in the most inhospitable conditions. Why? Maybe because it has learned how to draw nourishment from a hidden source. “Be on guard,” Jesus tells his followers. Don’t let your hearts be squandered on focusing on unproductive things, things that do not nourish. Be on guard, in other words, notice what is emerging, which is harder than watching things fall apart. Such is the work of Advent: to notice the little sprouts, to remain hopeful even if we are not always optimistic. Hoping is always against the grain; it just is! Notice the inner voice that calls us to a life of prayer and devotion, even if we fumble our way toward faithfulness. We are invited, still, to invest our lives, to pour out ourselves for the things that matter most.

The promise of summer, even as the days grow darker by the hour, the promise is nearer than we thought. We know this because “darkness does not come from a different place than light; it is not presided over by a different God.” (I believe this is a quote from Barbara Brown Taylor)

We will find joy this Christmas. If you’re not sure you believe that yet, well, believe it because Victor Frankl hoped against the grain on the grayest of days and believed again after noticing a light in a distant farm house. We will find joy again this year. If you’re

not sure yet, well, trust the people who decorated this place on Saturday; it looks like they are doing their best to believe it. Don't you think?

We will find joy this Christmas. If you're not sure, you will be, once you notice the smallest signs of life, like, the tightly wrapped buds of newness on a rhododendron, against the gray naked sky.