

November 29, Advent 1B (Mark 13:24-37)

In Advent, we expect the unexpected.

by [Julia Seymour](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue

From where I live in Montana, Yellowstone National Park is my backyard. Equipped with my annual pass, I usually go into the park at least once a month. I hike, watch the animals, and seek out spaces that are so silent, my pulse sounds like a drum in my ears.

The park is beautiful with its lodgepole pines, grunting bison, wide grasslands, and swift rivers. It is also strange—full of spitting mud pots, mineralized hillsides, unexpected tremors, and unpredictable spouts of hot water. The park offers consolation by offering reminders of the strength of the earth and the almost everlasting nature of season cycles and life and death.

Alongside that comfort, the park also warns about the risks and dangers of the present. The destruction of previous fire seasons is, like other effects of a changing climate, a reminder that even unintended harm can take generations to heal, if healing is even possible. There is no spot so peaceful in the park that it is possible to forget this lesson.

Yellowstone National Park is my advent all year. It is a place of tensions, of already and not yet, of relaxing into promises but being vigilant about danger. Like the liturgical season, the park has something different around each turn. The changes in scenery can be so abrupt as to take one's breath away. Steep and colorful canyons, narrow and ancient, yield to wide open prairies with vistas that provide a view that is impossible to cover on foot in a day.

In our faith communities, Advent does this same work. While we are reminded of God's eternal love and mercy, we are also warned to be alert, engaged, and active in preparation for what is to come. Our faith sits on the caldera of God's own timing, intention, and will. We often mistake the rumbles and shifts of the landscape as signs of that caldera giving way, but it is more likely the Divine adjusting to our resistance and reluctance to be the fullest form of who we have been called to be.

Jesus' apocalyptic words in Mark create one of those shifts. We have become so used to hearing them and to taming their wildness that we no longer see their twinned consolation and warning. We are alive in God's wildness—beautiful, strange, and not at all controlled by us. There are places in the Divine plan that we do not know. These unmapped territories are not for us to know or to explore in this life, but that does not mean they are not real. The activity in these spaces brings life and death, spiritual warfare, and new creation. Occasionally, we feel the movements, we glimpse the shapes, we perceive the power at work, but we cannot know the fullness of what is happening all around us.

Instead, we are called to a specific kind of alertness to what is right in front of us. We have been tasked with work that is necessary for the flourishing of God's economy in our own spaces. The wild nature of our present time demands this attentiveness in every aspect of our lives. There is danger in complacency and risk in misinterpreting what we see and what we think we know.

The year behind us has made the word *unprecedented* a cliché. In our Advent wilderness, waiting and watching, we learn again and again to expect the unexpected. Signs in the natural world, do not be surprised. Pregnant virgins and righteous fiancés, do not be surprised. Fierce prophets and unending demand for justice, do not be surprised. Stay alert.

There is a short detour called Firehole Lake Drive off the Grand Loop in Yellowstone. This three-mile winding road twists past small hot springs, bubbling mud pools, and steaming mineral streams. Here, out of the way, is one of my favorite sights in the park. Just to the side of a wooden walkway is a small geyser. Called Young Hopeful Geyser, it spits and shoots its hot stream of sulphury water constantly. Actually erupting on a very irregular schedule, Young Hopeful keeps churning and responding to the conditions underneath and around it.

I love Young Hopeful because it reminds me that not everything, nor everyone, has the capability of being Old Faithful Geyser. There are those among us whose work is predictable, powerful, and admired. Most of us, however, are Young Hopeful Geyser. While our most dramatic efforts are erratic, our regular demonstrations can be counted on day in and day out. Young Hopeful is an Advent geyser. It boils and roils with what already is, with the truth that is known. All of that is preparation for the time to come when a more fierce and dreadful reality will occur.

Mark's words call us all to be Young Hopeful, to be Advent geysers in the world. We have been given work that is not ours to put down. We cannot turn off the love that is under and around us, the power and pressure of God's own caldera. Instead, we let that wildness pour out of us in our daily work and in the occasional eruptions that are necessary in this world as it is.

From a geyser, let us learn our lesson. Its waters churn and change the landscape around it. Its steam makes life possible that cannot exist elsewhere and also prevents the growth of other things. When we see these things taking place, we remember that our Advent lives are contained in God's wildness—past, present, and future. At the edge of a geyser, as in Advent, comfort and warning go hand in hand.