

Yanking out the tablecloth (Advent 1B; Mark 13:24-37)

Advent amid the rubble of 2020

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The magic trick of pulling a tablecloth out from under a place setting relies on three things: a straight down pull, an unhemmed cloth, and Newton's first law of motion. Pulling down, not out, causes the unhemmed edge of the tablecloth to move speedily between the tabletop and the dishes. Inertia keeps the glasses, silverware, and plates sitting in their neat arrangement, even while the magician gathers up the cloth while taking a bow.

The past year has felt like one tablecloth yank after another—with very little magic. The hemmed edges of white supremacy, COVID-19, climate change, and more have snagged our plans and intentions. Surrounded by shattered pieces of our expectations, it is worth taking a moment before we decide to set our table again.

The Advent to which we are accustomed is part of the rubble of this year. Even now, we are shifting and sorting out how to create a season of anticipation that leans into hope and away from dread. In a season that specifically marks how all things are possible with God, so much feels impossible. We have our own inertia, held in place by grief. We wait for the yank of the cloth again to see what will come crashing down.

Jesus' words from Mark 13 are hardly the consolation we need at this time. In a year that began with Australian wildfires and ended with terrible burning in the western United States, a darkened sun and moon are not metaphors. With so much disruption, it is difficult to remember that an apocalyptic text is meant to be both a

balm and a motivator.

In the parable that follows the apocalyptic warning, Jesus warns faithful people to keep alert. In language that accepts slavery as normative, Mark writes that believers will keep at their tasks, ever vigilant, because who knows when accountability for one's work will be demanded? Urged to constant alertness, those at work do the same things over and over.

It is easy to relate to a lack of enthusiasm for moving around the same small living space, day after day. We know well the lethargy that comes from repeated tasks, lack of feedback, and a diminishing hope of anything changing. We have continued to set the table and maintain a house where racialized oppression has made itself at home. We have cleaned the drapes and straightened up in a place where families in peril are separated, community health is politicized, and the wealthy are confident that they can pay to have the eye of the needle enlarged.

Is this actually the dwelling to which we expect the Lord of love to return? The crash followed by crash followed by crash of 2020 should not have been a surprise. There is no magic in the way an idolatrous empire can take down both the oppressed and those who have worshiped at its own altar.

In an Advent that's already different, let's refuse to set the table of oppression and exclusion again. Let's be alert to our language, our habits, our illustrations, and our traditions. Now is the time, when so much has to change anyway, to walk away from "how we've always done it" toward "here is how we do it now." Put away the light/dark dichotomy. Begin your services with a land acknowledgement. Talk about the economic and immigration aspects of the nativity story. Change on top of change is tough, but it is how we stay alert, attuned to the nearness of Christ.

Opening ourselves to new ways of being, new ways to serve, new ways to set the table, the Spirit will guide us into an Advent that matters. The church that focuses on community well-being and missions of reconciliation and healing will barely be disturbed by a tablecloth yank. Alert for Christ and alive with love, "in those days, after that suffering" our advent will have begun.