

## First Sunday of Advent (2024)

We tend to associate pastoral images with Advent, don't we? In my mind's eye, I see shepherds looking to the heavens. I picture Mary bowing humbly before the Archangel Gabriel. I imagine Advent candles glowing ever so softly.

So what do we do with today's Gospel reading? Terrible signs in the sky... The roaring of the waves... People dying of fright... The coming of the Lord described as an "assault on everyone who lives on the face of the earth"... How do we reconcile these violent images with the soft light of an Advent candle? Why this disturbing reading today? Why this two-by-four between the eyes?

In fact, our Gospel on this First Sunday of Advent is a kind of wakeup call. It's a reality check of the very first order. Jesus challenges each of us to reassess who we are and what we value.

He begins by focusing on the impermanence of the natural world. Listen to his words: *"The ground will be shaken and there will be disturbing signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars."* The message is clear: nothing is permanent. Everything in the cosmos will eventually pass away.

Our national identities and cultures? No permanence there either. Jesus foresees great *"dismay"* among the nations.

And it doesn't get any better when we read today's Gospel symbolically. Few of us have experienced an earthquake or a tidal wave. Many of us, however, have experienced crises of a more personal nature: the death of a loved one, a divorce, the loss of a job, the alienation of a brother or sister, a tragic accident, an illness... In difficult moments such as these, it can seem as though the very ground beneath our feet is being washed away. Earthquakes and tidal waves, indeed...

And some among us have experienced depression, that terrible loss of hope that sometimes seeps into our lives. As the Lutheran philosopher, Paul Tillich, put it, we can all too easily lose sight of that "ultimate horizon" that we had presumed to give meaning to our lives.

And there's the matter of our own mortality as well. Our culture tells us that we don't have to worry about death. There's always a new experience to be pursued, a new possibility, or a new pill that'll make everything right. We know better, of course.

In today's Gospel, Jesus uses the images of an earthquake and a tidal wave, both literally and symbolically, to remind us that vulnerability is part and parcel of every aspect of our existence. We're vulnerable in terms of our national identities, our cultures, our relationships, our physical wellbeing, and our emotions, too.

And here's the problem as Jesus sees it. We tend to invest our sense of meaning, our sense of value, our very identities in that which is impermanent, in that which is vulnerable to destruction. We tend to root ourselves in that which is temporary and passing.

Now let's be clear. This doesn't mean that our cultural attachments, our physical and emotional wellbeing, and our relationships with others are unimportant. No, these blessings in our lives have great value. Just look at the life of Jesus. Jesus had a national and cultural identity; he wept with the women of Jerusalem when he predicted the destruction of their homes. Jesus maintained his health; the Gospels indicate, in fact, that he got plenty of exercise. Jesus walked all over Galilee. And by all accounts, he ate quite well, usually at someone else's expense. Jesus' spiritual balance and emotional wellbeing were important as well; he often stepped away from the press of the crowd to pray. And relationships were important to Jesus, too. Think, for instance, of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Yes, these aspects of Jesus' life were vulnerable to loss and change, but they were important to him, nonetheless.

But Jesus' roots ran even deeper. Jesus had anchored his identity, not in that which is subject to change and eventual destruction; Jesus had anchored in identity in his relationship with the Father. And this made all the difference. Jesus' relationship with the Father would sustain him when everything else that was important to him would be stripped away. Yes, Jesus would be abandoned by his friends. He would be rejected by those who had standing in the community he loved. His freedom, his dignity, even his clothes... Everything that Jesus owned would – in time – be taken away from him.

Could any of us withstand these kinds of losses? Could any of us withstand these kinds of earthquakes and tidal waves in our lives?

Despite all this, Jesus didn't lose hope. He didn't lose hope because he had rooted himself in the love of the Father. Jesus didn't lose hope even while reciting the first lines of Psalm 22 just moments before his death. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,"* Jesus cried, knowing that the answer to this plea is provided for later in the very same psalm: *"[God] did not turn away from me, but heard me when I cried out."*

Jesus had anchored his identity in the love of the Father. He had rooted himself in his relationship with the Father. And in doing so, Jesus experienced meaning and purpose in his life and in his death that wasn't subject to loss or to destruction.

Still more... In the love of the Father, Jesus experienced a profound sense of meaning that engendered meaning, in turn, to his identity as a Jewish man. The love of the Father inspired his prayer life. The love of the Father enriched Jesus' mission as a teacher and healer. No, Jesus didn't abandon his life in order to root himself in the love of the Father. The love of the Father overflowed in him and enlivened every aspect of his life.

And so today's Gospel reading... On this First Sunday in Advent, Jesus reminds us that we put ourselves at great risk when we anchor our identities, at the deepest level, in anything that is subject to change and destruction. We put ourselves in peril when we root ourselves in the impermanent.

Yes, it is good to appreciate and tend to our national and cultural identities, our careers, our families, and our physical and emotional wellbeing. After all, these gifts come from God. Unless this appreciation is rooted in something more, however, we are subject to the loss of that "ultimate horizon" described so eloquently by Paul Tillich. And that something more is God. We are invited to sink our roots more deeply into God's hopes and dreams for us.

So here's an idea. I invite you to include a particular psalm in your prayer life this Advent Season. I invite you to pray the very first psalm in a meaningful and sustained way. Using two remarkable images, this beautiful psalm distinguishes between all that is impermanent and that which is truly permanent and thus transcendent. The very first psalm uses the idea of

rootedness to great effect. The psalmist writes: "*Blessed are those to whom the law of the Lord brings joy. They are like trees planted near streams of water that yield their fruit in season.*" When drought comes, when crisis comes, "*their leaves do not wither...*"

And those who anchor themselves in something less than God? They are un-rooted; they are like chaff. They are like tumbleweeds. And so when a crisis comes, those who have been seduced by the seeming permanence of the world are unable to withstand the loss of their "ultimate horizons." Like chaff, they are blown about this way and that.

This is the challenge we face *this* Advent Season. This is the choice today's Gospel reading gives us. On the one hand, the rootedness that comes from a relationship with God, a relationship deepened in prayer and the experience of the Eucharist, a relationship that promises to give transcendent meaning to every other aspect of our lives... On the other, the rootlessness that is offered by the world...

We are summoned *this* Advent Season to sink our roots as deeply as we can into God.