***The Courage To Be Who You Really Are***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Dec. 1, 2024*

*based on Luke 21:25-36*

Signs in the sun moon and stars. Trouble among nations. The heavens shaken and everywhere, people fainting in terror. With those 2000 year old lines from the gospel of *Luke* searing our eardrums, I want to segue to an example of contemporary “prophecy.”

But before that, let me note that on the first Sunday of Advent every year this or a similar earth- shattering gospel text shows up in the lectionary and each time it does, I Google around to find a current prediction of the end of the world. Because, you know, there’s always someone expecting cataclysm, and here’s the latest one I could find …

A religious sect that has been around since 1980, called *The Messiah Foundation International* maintains that the world is passing through its twilight phase. It’s founder, Riaz Ahmed Gohar Shahi (“Shahee”), claimed to have met with Jesus Christ on May 29,1997 in Taos, New Mexico (evidence that Jesus loves green chilies.

Details of their meeting are scanty but members of the sect believe that the world is supposed to end in 2026 when, according to their prophet, a comet will collide with earth. Before this happens, the image of Shahi is supposed to become visible on the face of the moon to provide comfort to his followers.

There it is - a sign in the moon.

Well, every prediction of the end thus far has been wrong. Not 98% of them; no, one hundred solid percent, a perfect record of failure and sometimes, fraud.

In any case, tradition tells us that in the last week of his life, Jesus had a message for all who follow him: “Be on guard. Be alert at all times. You have something to wait for. Stay sharp. Watch.” What are we to make of that?

I mean, look -- Christmas is close at hand and it comes with a promise of something soft and new, a warm cuddly baby for Christmas, but Biblical tradition tells us that the message the disciples got from Jesus is somewhat different. They understood that the world, as they knew it, was coming to a close. Something BIG was going to happen.

For good or ill? They had no idea. They *did* sense, however, that it was something that would make the present and future unrecognizable to them.

And Advent tradition says that we are supposed to wait with a kind of uneasy anticipation. Why? Well, as I said, every prediction of the end has been flat wrong, if not laughably wrong, right? And yet there are also people of faith about who have a more nuanced sense of the touch of the holy that can steal upon us, unawares.

But, hey, few of us are mystics. Few of us can recognize the hand of God when it creeps silently upon us like the medieval mystics claimed to.

I mean, look. We tend to use templates from the past to make sense of everything in the present, and in the case of the things of God, they don’t often work. Let me tell you why.

You know how when you are waiting for something in particular, your brain has a way of phasing everything else out? If you are waiting for a certain car to pull into your driveway – say, it’s midnight and your seventeen-year-old daughter is not home yet – are you going to pay a whole lot of attention to the sound of an airplane overhead, or the hum of the refrigerator cutting out?

No, your ears, your whole being, is tuned to one frequency alone, namely, the hum of that old Honda Accord you let her drive. If someone talks to you while you are waiting you may pretend to be listening, but only until you hear a car coming down the road.

Scientists have devised a game that proves how hard it is for us to notice one thing when we are expecting something else. Here is how it goes.

They sit you down at a table in front of what looks to be an ordinary deck of cards and they flash six of them at you, asking you to identify them as fast as you can – nine of diamonds, three of hearts, Jack of clubs – wait now, what was that fourth one? Then they repeat the exercise, slowing it down a little so you can get the ones you missed the first time. Except there’s a problem.

The 3rd time is so slow that you think you must be an idiot because there is still *one* card you simply cannot identify. You think you know what it is, but you are not sure, and it is not until the cards are all laid face up on the table in front of you that you can see what the problem is. The mystery card is a six of spades . . . only it’s not a BLACK spade; it’s a RED one.

The deck has been fixed. That card has been tampered with, BIG TIME. You could not see a RED spade because you know that all spades are supposed to be BLACK.

So, how does that relate to Jesus and those signs in the sun and the moon?

Well, long ago, for a very short time when I was in college, I had a girl-friend who insisted I try out her church. It was a very small and very conservative and the people there who were so very welcoming, were totally obsessed with the notion that Jesus would be back very soon. Jesus for them was packed and already on his way to earth.

He’d be easy to spot, dressed all in white, riding a white horse with wings spread, dropping out of the clouds. He was expected to touch down on the White House lawn, maybe, or the ice rink at Rockefeller Center. It was all very scripted, and totally linked to addressing the troubles and enemies of the time.

Well, I was as good a guest as I could be, but I wondered, quietly, what if he might come as a Guatemalan of Mayan extraction, riding a burro, or a Tibetan monk on a yak? What if he’d come out of the housing projects in Richmond, California on a broken down bicycle wearing dreadlocks down his long back?

Stranger things have happened. “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary,” some asked, when he first came back to Nazareth as a well-known itinerant preacher?

I mean, his friends and even his family didn’t recognize him.

You know, “What kind of Messiah would have first been a common laborer?”

RED spades have ALWAYS been hard to see.

“Look at the fig tree,” says Jesus in this morning’s text to his disciples who are easily obsessed by signs in the cosmos.

Never mind red spades. If we want to learn what God is up to, we can begin by attending to the world right around us. There are parables happening on every street corner, says Jesus, and clues to the arrival of the reign of God in every square foot of earth, but who among us is looking for them?

That is what Jesus was getting at when he told people to look at the fig tree. They may not have looked at one for a while. They may have been focused on abstract things, like judgment or salvation, or they might have been filled with fear, expecting dramatic things like earthquakes, or plagues, or World War III.

I’ve always said to people that if the message of a preacher is clearly meant to scare; scare you into doing something the preacher has in mind, be very careful.

I just don’t think fear is God’s usual way to get people’s attention. Autocrats love it, find it very effective, but God?

Fear is disabling. And what we need is not to stand down but to mount up, We need courage to live in such times as these.

Maybe by directing the disciple’s attention to a common fig tree, and AWAY from their fears, Jesus was trying to get people to pay attention, NOT to scary things they have no control over, but common seasonal things that might, on a close look, fill them with wonder. Even a fig tree.

Maybe, says Jesus, God is speaking to us in the most ordinary things on earth.

Abraham Joshua Heschel is remembered to have said, “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. ....get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

Some years ago I was visiting Santa Fe, New Mexico with family. We went to the Georgia O’Keefe Museum there in the downtown. I had to park a couple of blocks away and as I was walking I saw this woman coming along toward me and I thought, “I know that lady.” I remember thinking I might have gone to high school with her.” And then, just before I was moved to address her familiarly, I realized all at once that she was Ali McGraw, the actress.

I was pretty impressed with my sighting but nobody else seemed to be. And it faded pretty quickly in that museum, surrounded by those huge paintings of cow skulls and flowers. Who else has ever painted things more common than Georgia O’Keefe? Her paintings are exactly like Jesus’ injunction to take your eyes off things our popular culture is obsessed with and look, instead, at something as common as a fig tree.

In fact, Georgia O’Keefe is remembered to have once said, “No one sees a flower, not really. To look at a flower takes time, like having a friend takes time.”

Every day, at least once we say, “I don’t have time” or, “I’m out of time.” But the truth is that we have all the time in the world. I don’t have any more or less than Mother Teresa had or . . . Georgia O’Keefe. Right? There’s simply … today.

Time.

Recently a minister friend told me I had to see a web page that is called, get this, “The Death Clock.” I opened it up and right away it asked me what my birthdate was, whether I was a smoker or non-smoker, my rate of alcohol consumption, and my BMI (Body Mass Index) and then, in a moment, it opened my “Personal Death Clock” page complete with a tomb stone and the initials, R.I.P..

It said that my personal day of death was Sunday, March 5, 2045. Then it said, “You have  **648,028,799**seconds left to live.” Have a nice life.”

The seconds and milliseconds were right there, ticking away, hurriedly. Then it asked me if I wanted to use that page as my “personal screen saver” so that every time I open or close my computer I could see just how many seconds I have left to live.

“No,” I thought, “but thanks for sharing.”

I could see that a lot of people had sent e-mail to the web master of this sight accusing him of being grossly morbid. His point, he says, in his own defense, is that when you see that your time on earth is limited, the quality of your life might just begin to increase. You might not only be prompted to live better, you might begin to savor your moments.

Time IS passing. Whether it passes quickly or slowly, time IS all we have. The question is, how will we use it?

In Advent terms the question is more precisely: How shall we wait? Will we be casual about our every day, or will we keep watch, stay awake. Will we just see all the things we’ve seen before or will we try to have fresh eyes that might bring us *new* visions.

Jesus’ answer about looking at the fig tree is, as I said, an invitation to pay attention not only to what may happen in the future, but also to what is happening in front of us right now. It’s a clue that God might be reaching out to us through things we would not have thought of as “religious,” even something as common as a fig tree in bloom.

Scholars tell us that texts like this one in Luke -- ones that talk about what is coming up in the future, are called, “apocalyptic.” Perhaps you already know that the word “apocalypse” means, “Revelation.”

Barbara Brown Taylor who gave me the idea for this sermon says that revelation “is the moment when you are looking at something you have looked at half your life and suddenly you see it for the first time, whether it’s the sun coming up through the trees like an iridescent peach, or the sorrow in your neighbor’s eyes, or your own face looking back at you in the mirror.

Revelation is the moment when you can see through, see into, see beyond what is going on, to what is *really* going on –not because you are some kind of genius, but because God decided to let you (and you happened to be paying attention at the time).”

“Be on your guard,” says Jesus. “Be alert at all times.” Not so you will know when to grab your crash helmet, and head for the basement, but so you will know when the kingdom of God is near to you. So you will not miss God when God comes. “Stand up and raise your heads” Jesus says, “because what could very well redeem your life is drawing near.”

You know, there are all kinds of ways to wait, even when what you are waiting for is something terrible.

I’m impressed with the similar reaction so many have had about the last election. Many, if not most people I’ve talked to, have gathered themselves and have vowed to live one day at a time, and to choose joy as many of those days going forward as possible. They have vowed to not let the agenda of Project 2025 take all the air out of the room; they have decided to keep breathing and live and love with as much gusto as ever. Can you relate?

I know of someone who was eight years old when London was bombed nightly in 1940. She lived in the heart of town with her grandparents, her cousin Bettine, and a big English sheepdog named, fittingly, Blitz. Blitz went with the family to their sandbagged garage when the air raid sirens sounded. They shared the shelter with a Swedish couple who had a daughter about the same age as Bettine, and what Bettine remembers was what fun the two of them had.

Nothing in life since has ever surpassed it for pure fun, she says.

“We saw things in those sandbags no one else saw,” she says. “We hunted for gold in them and we found it. Then we hid it again. Sometimes we found goblins and faeries too. There was a whole world down there that the adults could not see. They sat up on their mattresses reading their books and when we got too loud they’d say, “Shh,’ we can’t hear the bombs.”

“Then we would listen too, and if the explosions were nearby we would get scared, only the Swedish girl taught us what to do. ‘Lie on your back and cross your arms over your chest,” she said, ‘and God will protect you.’ After the bombs stopped we would howl with laughter. We would sneak outside and look up at the sky – the beautiful sky where all the ugliness came from – until some air raid warden came along with his flashlight and shooed us back inside.

Then our dog, Blitz, would get in bed with us and Grandmother would tell us such wonderful stories. I tell you, we had an awfully good time!”

There are all kinds of ways to wait, apparently, even in the worst of times. There is the tense dread-filled waiting of those for whom a spade is always and only a spade. There is even a kind of compulsive waiting, in which one collects signs of the end like souvenir spoons. Get the whole set and—poof—the rapture comes!

The problem with all these, as far as I can tell, is that they assume God operates by the same rules we humans do and will never slip a wild card into the deck.

Only, what if God’s hand is ALL wild cards? The only way to wait for a God like that is to look (NOT at social media or the television), but to be on guard, to be alert at all times, so that we do not miss the revelations we are being offered everyday of our lives right where we live. We need to be alert for street-corner parables and apocalyptic fig trees, gold in sandbags and children howling with laughter at bombs dropping from the sky, the beautiful, beautiful night sky.

How then shall we wait? With basic, every day courage; as wide-awake as we know to be. As fully alive as we can be, not because we have to, but because we can, thanks to the one our ancient tradition says has died, who is risen, who comes again, and again, and again.

Amen