

“Looking for the fig tree”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 and Luke 21:25-36*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I've been doing some reading online—always a mistake. And I've been led to the conclusion that all the world's ills can be traced back to one nefarious group. No, it's not Democrats or Republicans. It's not stock brokers or actors or immigrants or the Illuminati. It's... millennials. That “I'd rather text you than talk with you” generation of young adults born in the 80s and 90s. Of course, this was a rather disappointing conclusion, as I am a millennial. It is never a pleasant occurrence to realize that you are the root of all evil. However, as I read a multitude of articles describing how millennials are destroying everything from the American Dream to marriage, I was left no other possible conclusion. My remorse deepened as I discovered more and more things that I apparently had ruined. It would seem that my cohort and I are responsible for the death of golf, home ownership, dinner dates, cruises, napkins, running, soap bars, diamonds, department stores, lunch, handshakes, cereal, suits, sitcoms, and one oddly specific article about the downfall of marmalade.

If these articles are to be believed, we millennials have been busy destroying everything you love. I'd resent this accusation if it weren't for the fact that when I look around today, I have to admit there aren't many of us here. I guess we can add *church* to the list of things we have killed.

You're welcome.

In all seriousness, I can understand the impulse to blame someone. These are not easy times.

All this talk in Luke about hardship, a time of confusion and fear, doesn't seem all that different from our world right now. Whether it's fires in California, children being teargassed, or reports of climate change, the world can feel like it's falling apart. These days, people seem meaner, more divided, more cynical. And for some of us, it doesn't take turning on the news to feel this way; we carry burdens of our own.

Jesus' words to the disciples feel more familiar than we would like.

*There will be distress and confusion, says Jesus. People will faint from fear and foreboding... For it will come upon all who live.*

At the time, Jesus was preparing the disciples for coming persecutions and for the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. He was also speaking of what we commonly refer to as the “end times,” when God comes in judgment and salvation to create a new world.

It's not hard to find Christians who believe that such end times are upon us. They point to this passage, and say, *See, Jesus promised signs of destruction. And here they are!*

Well, Jesus also warned about false prophets who think they know more than they do—which is usually very little—and try to predict the will of God.

Jesus' message was simpler. He said, *I need to prepare you. Because there will come a day when you will look for me, and not see me. And I know it will be tempting to close your eyes in fear.*

*Maybe you'll pretend like everything's OK. You'll tell yourself that you should be grateful; it could be worse. You'll try to go on with life as usual, as if the bad didn't even exist. Or maybe you'll pretend that there's no good left in the world at all, no hope at all. You'll shut your eyes and make the night even darker. You'll say things like, "Life just isn't what it used to be" or "Things really seem to be getting worse."*

*But I must encourage you to keep your eyes open, to face the night and keep watch; for I am coming to you.*

This might seem like an odd message for Advent, but then again, this is the season for keeping watch. It's the season when the magi look for a star in the night sky, when Mary watches for the angel, when the shepherds watch over their sheep, and when we look for Christ to be born again amid danger.

Jesus worried that our fear and our heavy hearts would stop us from looking, make us give up. Fear has this way of slithering inside us, coiling around the mind. It "drives us inward, hardens our hearts, darkens our vision, and stunts our imagination" (David Lose). It makes it impossible to see what God is up to.

And so Jesus offers this radical statement. He says, in the face of fearsome times, we should "stand up and raise [our] heads" (Luke 21:28). We should stare them down.

In doing so, Jesus echoed the most common command in Scripture: "Do not be afraid." It's what the angel Gabriel said to Mary all those years ago when he visited her. It is a phrase that appears in the Bible more than 120 times: "Do not be afraid."

Instead of closing your eyes in fear, turning to false optimism or pessimism, keep your eyes open. Watch. In the midst of a world falling apart, you will see summer leaves sprouting. You will see a fig tree, and all trees, growing and blooming.

Jesus' point is that if we focus only on what is passing away and close our eyes, we will miss what God is creating. We will fail to see the fig tree and its leaves. But if we keep our eyes open, they will grow accustomed to the dark; they will begin to see things we could not see before—little things growing, building, seeds of light waiting to burst. God in the manger.

For instance, if we take a glance at marriage statistics, we will see that fewer young people are indeed getting married these days. Marriage is on the decline. And if we stopped there, if we shut our eyes in dismay and fear, that's all we'd have. But if we chose to keep our eyes open, to keep searching the data, we would discover that it's also true that fewer married couples are getting

divorced. An important study released just a few months ago by family demographer Philip Cohen shows a significant decrease in divorce among those under 45, and the data indicates that this is a trend that will continue as they grow older. Those who are getting married are waiting longer, are more selective, are more committed, and are thus taking marriage seriously. With open eyes, we see that perhaps young people aren't killing marriage at all; they're saving it.

We might say the same for the church. Yes, there are fewer young people. And we recognize the challenges that trend poses. We grieve every person not here. But then I look at the young people who are here, and I see that—unlike some folks in past generations—they're not here for a pleasant social club, or out of obligation or a sense of status, or because they lack alternatives. They're here because there's only one reason left to come to church: faith. They are ready to serve and share God's love.

I am reminded that our most generative times as a people have been when we faced a crisis but persisted in looking for the new thing God was growing. It was during the Babylonian exile that the Jewish people wrote down for the first time the first five books of the Bible—the Torah—so that future generations would always have the word of God. It took the destruction of the Temple, God's house, for Jews and Christians to develop the synagogue, and later the church, and come to find God everywhere. In the Book of Acts, the church only begins when Christ departs. It's only then that Peter finds his rock, his courage. Centuries later, out of oppression rose the black American church and liberation theology; out of pain came God crying freedom through Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King Jr., Gustavo Gutierrez and Oscar Romero. And today, as we face the crisis of a shrinking church with shrinking power, the end of Christendom, we see the church becoming braver, more loving, more inclusive, more authentic, more just, more missional, more spiritual and joyous, and maybe more faithful.

It wasn't long ago that we could have closed our eyes in despair as our beloved nursery school closed, but we kept watching, paying attention, to what God was doing in our midst, and now we have a new children's and youth ministry called REACH.

This Advent, Jesus invites us to keep alert and watch, even as life gets hard. If we watch long enough, we will see that what we thought was an ending was just a beginning. God is there, in the dark, growing figs, building churches, planting stars of light in the sky, pointing to a manger where hope begins again. **Amen.**