

Stuck in Advent
Matthew 21: 18-22

Would Jesus do a thing like that? Lash out at a fruitless fig tree with a curse, withering it forever? What sort of messiah strikes out against a helpless tree by the roadside? What sort of text is this, anyway? Would you read this to your children at bedtime, to teach them about what God is like? The thought makes me cringe, for I want my children to grow up knowing God as one who “blesses and keeps” them, as I say to them every night in benediction, not one who curses living things...I hope they will meet Jesus as the baby in the manger who grows up to feed multitudes, heal the broken, and free the captives....Is it so wrong that I should hope that the One on whom I stake my life would be an appealing, inviting Jesus, rather than this odd figure who hurls withering curses at barren trees? Perhaps we should hide this story from children and other seekers, maybe even expunge it from the canon—at the very least avoid reading it aloud in church. What Christology is offered here? What would you say about such a Jesus on your theology exam—or to your congregation?

It is a hard tale to interpret. It has been used variously by preachers to condone the eating of figs and condemn lazy laborers to fail to “bear fruit,” to invite Christians to pray for the seemingly impossible, and to cast aspersions on the childless. Several weeks ago, in a moment of desperation I turned to the notes for this story and its parallel in Mark in my Oxford Annotated Bible. There, scholars offer the following single sentence of help: “The meaning of this story is difficult to understand.” In more elaborated commentaries, other scholars seem more intrigued by the question of whether this tree-withering incident actually happened or is symbolic. There is no scholarly consensus as to the meaning of this pericope. So it seems that we are left to our own devices. Let’s see--It

acts and sounds like a miracle story—but unlike other miracle stories where water becomes wine or demons leave human flesh for swine, here, Jesus’ action has a negative result. It’s downright punitive. Jesus causes a living tree to wither. (Mark’s version of the story is starker yet: it includes the line that it was not the right season for fig trees to bear fruit, adding to the sense that Jesus acted capriciously). Matthew uses the ‘miracle’ as an object lesson for how faith can accomplish seemingly impossible things—but I am left to wonder why he did not choose a more positive miracle for such an example.

And yet this strange little pericope appeals to me, works on me, disturbs me, wrestles in me. It hints at a more complex, less predictable Jesus; a Jesus who acts in ways not easily explained or anticipated; a Jesus to whom we sing, “come thou *long* expected Jesus” instead of “come thou *as expected*, Jesus.” Besides, I recognize that fig tree—I have *been* that fig tree, cursed in barrenness, standing withered by the side of the road, without sign of hope for any alternative future. There is something compelling about this story for those of us Christians whose spiritual “home page” is either Advent or Lent, seasons in which the shadows and struggles of life and faith come forward.

The story brings to mind years in which the liturgical season of Advent was excruciating, years in which Larry’s and my own deep desires and ceaseless waiting for a child went unfulfilled for no apparent reason. American Protestants seem to prefer the side of Advent that focuses on joyful expectation, a glowing and expectant Mary waiting for the happy birth of her baby on Christmas morning. Ours is a market-driven culture bent on making sure Christmas arrives early and often, so our Advent days easily elide into early expressions of Christmas—a kind of liturgical, middle class, uneventful pregnancy narrative where waiting is a simple matter of passing time with no particular

struggle or tension involved. In those years when infertility defined my life, this Americanized version of Advent as four weeks of prenatal care, followed by blissful birth, nearly drove me out of the church, for I had little hope for any alternative future, and the church seemed hopelessly stuck this facile and passive version of Advent waiting.

Surely you grasp the pastoral theological problem here: on the one hand, we who affirm God's goodness and beneficence would surely not wish to say that God "causes" such tragedy as the inability to bear a child, or actively curses people, inflicting them with this or other forms of suffering. And yet on some level it is virtually impossible for one so afflicted to avoid the feeling that somehow God must be making this happen—especially in the face of a text like ours today with its ending claim that "whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive." Perhaps I *was* at fault, I sometimes wondered in spite of 'knowing better' as a sophisticated theological thinker--if I just had more faith...said the right prayers...ate the right organic fruits and vegetables...if Larry wore boxers instead of briefs...wasn't there something WE could do? What a curse.

I certainly *felt* cursed, if not by God, then by the very society in which I lived. During those advent years of waiting, we were surrounded by a plethora of unsolicited advice those akin to Job's friends, advice to 'relax, take a vacation,' and endless stories about people who finally became pregnant after adopting, making it that much easier for us to assume that we really were responsible for this problem. Resolve, the national support and advocacy organization concerned with infertility and adoption, reports that around one million US couples experience infertility. People told us we should just get on with our lives. We could not--infertility is a long term experience of disorientation, loss, and grief. One does not simply decide to be done with it. Nor is the experience

necessarily “resolved” by the subsequent birth or adoption of a child—years of longing in the face of an apparently capricious universe lend a certain angst and fear that complicates parenting. Some things about this emptiness never go away.

For women longing to give birth to a child, the music of the advent season whether religious or secular sounds with the anticipation of a child, a constant reminder that for them, there is no child coming. My experience personally and as a pastor with couples dealing with infertility tells me that these are people who really “get” what advent is about at a personal level—not in its culturally domesticated forms of counting down the days until Christmas, but as an often difficult, restless, tense spiritual discipline of waiting, longing, and hoping when there are no easy assurances of what lies ahead in Bethlehem, or later in Jerusalem—and a commitment to risk the journey anyway.

From these long seasons of waiting, I take two important learnings, both of concern for ministers of the Gospel. The first is pastoral: there are people in this community, in your congregations, who are right now in invisible agony because once again their hopes for a child have been deferred, while all around them people talk glibly, metaphorically, about waiting for a child during Advent.

The second learning out of the experience of hope deferred is the call to stand in solidarity with the vast majority of people in the world whose hopes—for an end to war in their land; for shelter or food or self-governance--are *constantly* being deferred. I believe that experiences of struggle like my personal one with infertility are opportunities to turn outward, beyond ourselves. Not maliciously conjured by God, these situations of struggle and near despair nevertheless become powerful opportunities for empathy and

action on behalf of the world that God loves. I hear in today's text about the withered fig tree invitations for us to get to "the *other* side of Advent"—to move to embrace the meanings of waiting for God to break into our midst that have more to do with struggle and discomfort than placidness and quiet warmth.

These Advent themes are essentially eschatological—not the eschatology promoted and sold by the writers of the *Left Behind* series who whose vision of hope leaves the Bible behind in its entirely individualistic and Manichean apocalyptic imagery. I instead refer to Advent eschatology themes about an edgy, agitation kindled by hope that God really is on the brink of doing a new thing. After all, there would be no restless waiting without some glimmer of hope for which to yearn; no need for the seemingly endless journey without some glimpse of what could happen upon arrival. Sometimes I think Christians in other parts of the world have much clearer Advent vision that we do—as they yearn, struggle, and hope for an alternative future that flies in the face of all the evidence around them. These Christians hope for a world in which there are no AIDS orphans; where no one dies from hunger or from illnesses untreated due to poverty; and where there is enough clean water to drink. In many other parts of the world—the Philippines, India, Haiti come to mind—Christians identify Advent much more with this tense, restless waiting for God's intended abundance to break through into our world, wait not just for a sweet baby but for the one who reconciles the world: "Come, Lord Jesus—deliver us from this crushing poverty." "Come, Lord Jesus—lift us up from the oppression of being occupied by another nation." "Come Lord Jesus—bring peace to our land." In such places, Advent is everything—Christmas, by contrast (at least in its commercialized versions) seems to be a relatively minor moment, a tiny bit of calm that

holds together the tension of the advent journey toward it and the march to Calvary on the other side of it. Christmas morning appears like the eye of a hurricane, a little window of hope and calm in a big storm of uncertainty.

But it is this vision of hope for a new reality that allows people to carry on a struggle against injustice or suffering over the long haul. Amnesty International, the organization that works for the release of political prisoners and victims of torture around the world, says that even a tiny message of hope can make the difference between survival and death for persons being detained and tortured. Maybe some of you have heard of the story they tell, of a man held in a small cell in isolation, subjected to physical for years. On the brink of giving up, one Christmas eve the man received a crumpled piece of paper from his prison guard with a simple message: “Miguel, we know you are there. Do not give up.” The picture of a single candle on the note, the symbol of Amnesty International, told the man that people were working for his release. That tiny sign of hope that things could change allowed him to continue to survive in desperate conditions until finally some months later Amnesty helped to secure his release.

Perhaps some of the puzzle of the fig tree story is that at first glance it seems so devoid of hope. What good news is found there? This one won't resolve easily and I cannot clean it up, Hollywood style, sending you out with warm feelings that will guarantee your return to the Cineplex. I am convinced, though, that much of Christian ministry centers on helping people notice the places where hope reaches in, within their context, despite all evidence to the contrary--and journeying together toward that hope that God is already at work transforming lives and futures. This is not a Pollyanna-like endeavor of finding silver linings. It is, instead, a practices of leaning toward Christmas

with one foot firmly stuck in Advent—a commitment to long term journeys where struggle is certain.

Where is the hope in this text? It is in part a matter of perspective: From the perspectives of people who are hungry for justice, for enough food, for medicines to heal, for security from violence—perhaps from the perspective of folks like this, a picture of Jesus so impatient with a world that is not ready to meet his hunger that he lashes out, is an image more hopeful than frightening.

Hope in the image of a barren tree? From my perspective as one who endured seasons of infertility, you who know further chapters of my story know that my life is now blessed with children in rich abundance—sometimes a little too rich!! But, in part due to my long walk in uncertainty, when my sense of identification with that fig tree was too close for comfort, I remain “stuck in Advent yearnings” long after the births of my children. I can never for a minute take for granted their presence on this planet. Therefore I cannot and will not take for granted the lives of *other people’s children*: I am still waiting—waiting for a time when the 9 million children in this country who have no health insurance will be able to get the medical care they need. Come Lord Jesus! We wait for the day when each day, 200 thousand children will not wake up homeless. Come Lord Jesus! I am waiting restlessly for the day when it will no longer be true in this world that every 60 seconds a child dies of an AIDS-related illness, while another becomes infected with HIV. Come Lord Jesus! Let us hope for a time when it will no longer be the case that every day in the US gunfire takes the lives of eight children. Come, Lord Jesus, come to this your people stuck in Advent. Come into our lives and our world for we are restlessly, anxiously waiting.

Amen.