

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees.”

I look at the fig tree all the time. My neighbor across the street has a magnificent one in her front yard. During the spring and summer it shields most of the house with an extravagant wall of green, but late in the autumn the whole façade flutters to the ground, revealing bare branches studded with beautiful, green skinned fruit. Other trees are also like this: the persimmon and the Chinese pistache come to mind, the one sporting orange globes and the other clusters of red berries.

“By their fruit shall you know them,” says Jesus, warning his disciples about false prophets who will arrive pretending they are he. That’s the trouble with words. They can speak truth. They can also lie. And it can be hard to tell the difference. Fruit, on the other hand, is always fruit.

Welcome to the First Sunday of Advent. Welcome to the roaring of the sea and its waves. Welcome to the season of joy and anxiety. Welcome to the End of the World. For that is where Advent always begins. Every new Advent awakens my favorite lines from T.S. Eliot:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

It may also be the reason I've preached every First Sunday of Advent since I was ordained in 1999. I'm that fool who rushes in where angels fear to tread. Over the years, I've made friends with endings and beginnings. It's not a comfortable friendship, but as the wise ones remind us, "Life does not exist for your comfort and convenience. Life is all about becoming human and whole."

Most of the time, the End of the World is a metaphor of radical renewal, but every once in a while, it really happens.

In October 2003, while I was serving as the fill-in Rector at St. Paul's Oakland, a man dressed in a pale blue suit and holding a gingham covered basket over one arm burst through the doors of the church and came prancing down the aisle. He announced in the rhythmic cadence of a TV preacher that he was a Catholic Evangelist arrived to warn us that the world was going to end on December 7. His countenance, slick with the sheen of snake oil, bristled with disapproval at the sight of me, a woman presiding at the altar of a Church of Christ. Meanwhile, graced

by a deep calm I don't typically possess, I answered him by quoting a version of the reading for the First Sunday of Advent. "The world will end," I said, "But we can't know when. Jesus said, "Be awake for you do not know the day or the hour." Meanwhile, my deacon, who was also a police officer, escorted him back to the street. Not until the service was over, did he tell me about the 12" knife concealed beneath the gingham covering the basket.

Held in the radiant clarity of Church, I knew this meant something. That man was telling me to be aware. He didn't know, any more than I knew, when the physical world would come to an end, but he could alert me to the presence of dangerous truths as hidden as the knife in his basket. In the world of psychological archetype, the knife or the sword is that which slices through the veil of ignorance.

It laid bare the divided world I then inhabited, which has only grown worse during the decades since; a progressive society which denounces God in favor of technology and achievement, a conservative society which confuses God with politics and patriotism, each one demonizing the other. Back then, I was a newly minted priest, trying to

articulate Good News I only partially understood to people who weren't sure they wanted to hear it.

The evangelist told me to keep slicing through the layer cake of misunderstanding. Believe no one but the God you will never know completely. Because if you think you know who God is, you don't know God.

I've had a lot of people explain God to me, often in very patronizing tones. The Evangelist did not. He proclaimed that a world was ending and he carried a hidden icon of the divisions which, in our obsessive need to be right, we are reluctant to heal.

That December 7 came and went without incident.¹ I knew it would, because the world had already ended once on December 7, in 1941. The world ends all the time. It ends with a cancer diagnosis, the loss of a beloved, the loss of a job, the end of a marriage, the discovery that I will never be pregnant, or the day I discover that I am.

¹ [In My Beginning is My End](#), Advent 1

So, every year, on the First Sunday of Advent, we read about the end of the world. And every year, on the First Sunday of Advent, we're still here.

Our gospel begins with a series of “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world...Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

And

“Be on guard,” says Jesus, “so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” Stand up. Raise your heads. Redemption is drawing near. Escape. Stand before the Son of Man. We

cannot be saved until we know from what we are being saved, and just as important, for what we are being saved. Take time this Advent, to know yourself. Take time this Advent, to face the world as it really is.

Now there's an obvious theological reason the Season of Advent has to begin with an ending. The birth of Jesus marks the beginning of an entirely new way of being, a new understanding, a new way of treating other people, both human and non-human alike, a point which Luke makes very clear by having Jesus born in a stable. You can't have a new world when the old one still has a hold on your heart. It's like trying to serve two masters. You can't decide which parts of the old world you want to keep and which you're perfectly happy to get rid of. When God makes all things new, we are redeemed by becoming new with them, and we become new by letting go. We don't need to give away all that we have, only our attachment. God knows what we need.

The historian Edward Gibbon blamed the Christians for bringing down the Roman Empire. I wish I could say he was right, but he wasn't. Nothing prepared me better to see the world we live in than to major in

Latin in college and follow the Roman mind into the church. The roaring of the sea and its waves has been scaring us for millennia. The heroic ethic of violence never left. The world ends all the time. And we are still here.

How we are here matters. Even as he warned of hard things to come, Jesus paused to remember a fig tree. How its leaves bring us into the warmth and light of summer. Advent calls us to pause, too.

When words become too much, when the sadness and anger all around threaten to overwhelm, when a diagnosis or a death has shattered my world, it is time to return to the trees, to return to my roots, to study the soil which nourished and raised me. To walk the wordless paths of an oak woodland, to feel the moist tranquility of redwoods. To revel in the mushrooms who pop up after rain. As we walk the soft soil where dead things are transformed into new growth, as we hear its songs and meet our non-human relatives, we begin to see that a healthy forest lives at peace with itself and all its parts, that a forest is a culture of cooperation, and when we join its culture of care, it heals us as we heal it, and teaches us not to be a polity, but an ecosystem.

As long as we are on earth, we will never fully know God. Maybe we never will. But we can know God's creation. We can know the fierce love of a doe for her newborn fawn. Our spirits can soar with the turkey vultures as they glide on drafts of air. We can thank the fig tree for its fruit.

It prepares us to meet the babe who will be born among the animals and the grass, who holds in his heart the great answer: this world is always ending. Let it go. There can be no life without death, no light without darkness. Be not afraid, for I am with you always and if you walk with me I will set you free. Amen.