

A sermon preached on November 28th, 2021 based upon 1Thessalonians 3:9-13 and Luke 21:25-28; 33-36 – the First Sunday in Advent – entitled "Regrets."

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13)

There is a tradition of the local fire department that on the Sunday morning before Christmas they send their fire truck slowly rolling through the neighborhoods blaring its siren with Santa aboard handing out candy canes. For years they would pass by near the church just as we were beginning worship for the fourth Sunday in Advent, and invariably the sound of the sirens would lead us to think there was something cataclysmic happening in the neighborhood. Bob Keller, a fireman himself had to ask them to avoid our neighborhood during worship. Perhaps though we should have asked them to move up their siren blasting to the first Sunday in Advent, because the Gospel readings that occur are always similarly jarring. It would have provided an appropriate soundtrack.

We hear Jesus in the last days of his life talk about how everything will begin to fall apart in anticipation of what the church has traditionally called Jesus' "second coming". They are not likely what you are looking to hear if you have just strung your Christmas lights.

"There will be 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.

(Note: In the Bible, the sea was viewed as the place where chaos reigns.) ***People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.***

"Be on guard 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." (Luke 21:25-28; 33- 36)

For forty years on the first Sunday in Advent I've faced the challenge of preaching on this passage and others like it -- "apocalyptic" passages they're called -- dealing with the trauma of what are called the "end times". The challenge comes not only because the words are disconcerting, but also from the fact that we live in a quite different context from that of the earliest church for whom these words were written. Back then, Christians lived with a strong expectation that Jesus would be returning any day -- an expectation that kept their attention focused on the state of their souls, with little thought given to long term planning. But 2000 years have passed, and Jesus has yet to return in the manner in which those early Christians expected. So, it can seem hard to connect with such passages.

There has always been, however a sense in which to be a human being is to live in the "end times", and by that I mean the end of our individual human histories. We know not the hour or day of our death. The distressing images that Jesus used to describe the "end times" well, they express metaphorically some of what each of us at times experiences in life, individually and collectively: feelings of fear and foreboding with all that is out of our control that threatens us.

What I'd like to consider today is the wisdom hidden inside these jarring words of Jesus.

As the years have passed, it has become easier for me to hear such passages addressing me personally. I've reached an age -- as have many of you -- in which it is impossible to deny the fact that the day of our death is far closer than the day of our birth. The majority of our lives has already been lived.

I was particularly struck this week by the words of the Apostle Paul as he wrote to the Thessalonians about his prayer that God would *"strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."*

He invites the Thessalonians -- and me and you -- to imagine the moment when the story of our lives on earth will be finished and we stand before God. Such an invitation leads me to ponder the life I have lived.

That word Paul used is intimidating: He speaks of being “blameless” before God. It suggests a life without regrets. But who among us can approach the end of our lives without any regrets?

As I think about the life I’ve lived, there are regrets regarding things I did or said that I wish I could take back, sins I’ve committed. I can’t say, though that these sorts of regrets weigh upon me. I trust in the mercy of God revealed in Jesus. I trust in God’s forgiveness.

My sense of regret lies elsewhere.

I’ve been spending a lot of time playing music on my banjo, discovering songs I hadn’t known. I always appreciate a song that captures something of what it feels like to be human. One such song is by Bella Fleck and his wife and fellow banjo player Abigail Washburn, and it captures my sense of regret. This is the chorus:

*If I could talk to a younger me
I’d tell me to go slow.
This time on earth it moves so fast
And when it’s gone, it’s gone.
When it’s gone, it’s gone.*

Those of you who are no longer young can probably identify with this sense of regret the song expresses. It is the recognition that much of our lives have been spent in a state of hurriedness, hunkering down in an attempt to get through the stressors of life. In a hurry, we fail to be present to our lives.

You may be familiar with what might be the greatest American play, Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town”. Before the pandemic, it was said that somewhere in America the play was always being produced – such is the power of the play to express the experience of being human.

The play is set in the imaginary small town of Grover’s Corner, New Hampshire. In the course of three acts we follow over time the lives of some of the town’s residents. In particular, we watch Emily grow up, get married, become a mother and then tragically die in giving birth to her second child.

In the imagination of the playwright, Emily’s spirit lives on after her death in the realm where the other departed spirits of the Grover’s Corner dwell. She begs to be given an opportunity to go back and experience a single day of her life. Others in the spirit realm warn her that her wish is foolish but nonetheless her request is granted. Emily

chooses the day of her 12th birthday. Waking up in her home initially Emily initially is filled with joy to encounter once more her mother and father, younger than she knew them to be when she departed this world. But as the day proceeds, Emily becomes increasingly distressed by the fact that her parents and others she loves can't appreciate what she sees – how beautiful and precious the ordinary moments of life are.

The pain of this disconnect becomes too much to bear and leads her to flee back to the Spirit world before the day is through. As she takes her leave, Emily cries out: *"Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you."*

Emily asks the play's narrator, the man known as the Stage Manager: *"Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it -- every, every minute?"* He replies, *"No. Saints and poets maybe...they do some."*

As time passes, it is hard not to live with some regret regarding our failure to see what Emily saw in her return visit to earth.

"If I could talk to a younger self, I'd tell me to go slow."

I recognize looking back on the life I have lived that I spent a great deal of it with a kind of tunnel vision, imagining that somewhere in the future when I had dealt with the problems of life I will relax and smell the roses, but always, there seemed to be something else to "get through."

So that is where my regret is located. I wish I could have gone slow.

I've come to hear the words of Jesus as moving as cautioning us against living a hunkered--down life.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness..." He's talking about the temptation to go through life anesthetized, of which drunkenness is just one form of anesthesia.

He warns of our hearts being weighed down by *"the worries of this life"* where our problems keep us from being present to the blessedness in spite of the burdens we bear.

Jesus describes the *"fear and foreboding"* that will descend upon people.

When I look back on my life and ask why I was in such a hurry, I recognize that I allowed fear to drive me. I often felt that if I didn't hunker down into a tunnel-vision life, my focus always on keeping the threats at bay well, the forces of chaos I feared would take over.

It is striking that the song that has spoken to me – *"If I Could Speak to a Younger Me"* – begins by advising the younger "me" to truly feel the fear that is an avoidable part of life:

*Feel the fear inside your chest,
Watch it ebb and flow.
The darkest hour dies at the dawn --
First clearing's yours to reap and sew.*

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus challenged his disciples to confront their fears – not to flee from them. When we turn towards them rather than away from them, we discover that in time the darkness of the fear gives way to the dawn. A deep love begins to arise.

The song continues,

*Feel the love inside your chest;
Watch it over-flow.
True love asks for nothing back
Take this world it's yours to grow.*

I can say that as I age, I am getting better at being present to my life – all of it – the joy and love but also the fear and sadness. It is all part of what it means to be a human, gifted with the opportunity to be alive in this preciously beautiful world where everything is passing away.

So, Advent is about learning how to wait – to wait in an unhurried way. What would it mean to have a blessed Christmas? I would suggest it isn't about getting through all your lists – all the presents bought and wrapped, the cards addressed and mailed, the decorations and parties picture perfect.

It's about being present – to yourself, to your loved ones, to God.

That's all.