

What Exactly Were You Expecting?

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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I always start advent with a bit of a “huh?” moment. Because the readings that the lectionary, which is this big collection of readings that folks throughout the Christian tradition are reading together, the lectionary gives us not a prelude to the birth of Jesus that we are allegedly catapulting towards, but instead gives us a bunch of texts about the second coming. I included one of those today, and added a few more that aren’t in your Bible but that scholars feel pretty good about in the Gospel of Thomas. It’s just so unexpected – why in Advent are we talking about the end of things. Shouldn’t we be talking about the beginning? Well, that’s a preview to what I think is one of the big arguments in scripture, which is that if the Spirit comes to us at all in life, it comes to us as a surprise.

We would love for truth to come to us all neatly wrapped in a bow – neatly packaged and ready for consumption. We’d love it if the message of Jesus, the message of the Buddha, or any other sort of wisdom was like our favorite kombucha. We could keep it on tap and pour a little bit out whenever we needed it. But the truth is always a surprise, it is always a disruptive, it is always a reversal in scripture. The truth is freedom for captives. The truth is life from death, the mustard seed is the biggest, the first are last, and the last are first. The truth is closer in the Bible to Zen koan than it is to anything else. It invites our minds to message its message over and over. And the truth will set you free, as Jesus said, but it will only do so after it has taken what it wants from you.

I can think of no greater image of this than the collection of verses that we have here before us today. One comes from the Bible, which compares the coming of Christ as the coming of a thief in the night. Now have you ever thought about that? What a surprising metaphor for a supposedly good thing that’s happening in the world. A thief. Well, if you’d like to take that and turn it up to 11, then the Gospel of Thomas tells us that the Kingdom of God, which is one way of saying the life of flourishing, is a like an assassin! What? An assassin? What a metaphor. The message seems clear to me. If you start in on this spiritual path, prepare to be surprised. Prepare to have your ideas challenged. Prepare to lose a lot.

They say that rabbis were not to study kabbalah, the mystical part of the Jewish tradition until their autumn years because it was dangerous to do so. It was too much truth too fast for young minds. It could do you in. And that always made sense to me in paring with what we’ve just talked about in scripture. That the truth is rarely what we think it will be. IT is always more surprising, more disruptive, more tangled than we think it ought to be. And to be clear, the truth is worth it, but it will break you down as well. It will rip away from you narratives that propped you up. It will replace them with different stories and

frameworks, and the truth is, our journey is never done, and so those frameworks are always ready for revision as well.

The assassin in the night, the thief ready to creep in, these all made sense to me. They have to if you're a kid from the middle of nowhere Alabama in the hinterlands of America who was fed a pretty steady diet of racism, homophobia, Christian supremacy, misogyny, and just bad theology on a daily basis. My experience of coming to know the truth more fully meant giving up everything I had ever thought that I knew. It meant putting away God for a time, and then picking God back up after a time. It means putting away Jesus and picking him back up after awhile, it meant a total perspective shift. The truth destroyed me. It undid me. It took me apart brick by brick. IT was an assassin of the old me. It did come like a thief in the night – born of knowing different people, born of that same faith that I would later reject because of the truth. You see, we are always jumping from platforms and then watching them disappear in our faith. What you used to get somewhere, is oftentimes not what you can keep around. Such is the life of faith.

And so this advent – you have to expect the unexpected. You must be ready for a shift in yourself. You must think of the end before the beginning because scripture is saying loud and clear over and over again that this thing is a circle and the end is the beginning and the beginning is the end. The spiritual path we are on has no guarantees or promises, save one: it will not go according to plan. And folks, that is part of the fun. You can become someone you can't even imagine right now. Such is the luminous capacity of the human for meaning. I am filled with wonder in my office over and over again.

My hope for you in sharing why these themes resonate with me in my own journey is to spur you to consider your own spiritual path and where you're going, where you've been, and how long you've been there. Who knows – you may be up for a journey. There's usually at least 4 big shake ups in our faith lives. Whatever is ahead, know that you are beloved and that we hold you here in care. You are our co-conspirator with the Divine and that is a holy partnership. I'm glad you're here. Blessed Be.