

“Hope for a Homesick World”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
November 28, 2021  
First Sunday of Advent (Year C)

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Jeremiah 33:14-16  
Luke 21:25-36

Early on in the pandemic, I began walking streets in Leonia-- there was nothing else to do-- and many of these streets I had never even walked before. Nothing was open-- not church, not school, no restaurants... for a while, even the playgrounds sat lonely for the children who once glided over slides, clung to climbing walls, and screamed while playing four-square. But I could walk through the neighborhood, and as I did I noticed that while the commercial world that had been wrapped into my everyday was suspended in time, nature went on... and in fact, it thrived: Eagles extended their wings as they soared overhead; groundhogs gathered whatever was their business to gather, pausing sometimes to gape and the landscape around them; turkeys trotted, not even minding when Thanksgiving came around. Deer darted and danced and decided which vegetables and flowers to eat from the buffet of neighbors' yards.

And I did notice peoples' yards. One yard I often passed had a low tree with deep green leaves, and some times of the year, its branches were wrapped in thin, gossamer bags. One day I saw the neighbor tending the tree with great care and so I asked her what kind of tree it was, and what she was doing. She told me it was a fig tree, and the bags were an organic way of protecting the fruit from pests. “They are ripe,” she told me. “Would you like a taste?” Then, she plucked a fat, green fig and placed it into my outstretched palm. Its plump heaviness gave me such a feeling of hope-- not only from the pink sweetness that I would soon sink my teeth into; but also from that short moment of connection with a stranger. In a world that had suddenly and drastically been cut off in isolation, counting just about every indoor interaction as dangerous, and those that were absolutely necessary done only while masked, this moment of accepting food from a perfect stranger felt nearly sacramental.

“Look at the fig tree,” Jesus told the people, “and all the trees. As soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already here.” This is one of the many signs scripture speaks about, signs that point the way toward God's coming kingdom, signs that point the way to a place we are homesick for, yet where have never been. The trees tell you what to hope for. As we witness the trees releasing their last hoorah of vibrant reds, browns, yellows and oranges, these are signs telling us that soon we can expect stark naked trees, a chill in the air, and perhaps, a blanket of snow. Already in the mornings we can see our breath when we talk. We accept this turn of events and some even celebrate it by sipping hot gingerbread lattes or sleeping with spoons under their pillows with hopes for snow. In the Northern Hemisphere, we associate this cold season with the time of Jesus' birth.

Jesus' parable about the fig tree is to remind people to keep waiting and watching with hope; be on the lookout for signs that the kingdom of God is near. This line is part of what scholars call "The Little Apocalypse;" this version Luke's gospel records is probably a rewrite of an older version found in Mark. Apocalypse means "uncovering" or "revealing." But the words described in Luke sound more like the prophecy of the end times:

"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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." These words describe the sort of dread I felt when the pandemic reached our neighborhoods nearly 2 years ago, a dread I have now mostly cast aside as we have adjusted to a new normal, but which sometimes still creeps into my sighing when news of our times sounds less hopeful.

Why does the lectionary offer such words of doom and gloom on a Sunday that is supposed to be about hope? Well, for one reason, the bible is honest-- at least some of the time-- about the fact that we do encounter fear in life. We do encounter strife between the nations. We do encounter the rumblings of a nature that-- despite our efforts to tame it-- remains out of our control. And, it turns out, these words from scripture actually point us to hope. As the text explores the contours of the earth's distress, the nations' confusion, the peoples' fears, and heaven's shaking, we can allow our own shadows to be explored too. The season of Advent is a season of preparation, a time when we light candles to explore what the darkness can reveal to us. It is a time of hiddenness, of yearning. Advent is a time when we acknowledge our homesickness for the world we yearn for, but one which has not yet come to be. Our homesick longings help birth that hoped-for world into existence, as we await Mary birthing the Christ-child into our lives.

My sister had a number of fruit trees in her yard when she and her family lived for two years in Europe, including a fig tree. She taught me something strange-- a little gross, but also fascinating-- about fig trees. For the fruit to ripen, it requires a fig wasp, which has flown from another fig tree, to enter the fig fruit at the base. The female burrows her way into the fig, losing her antennae and wings as she squeezes her body through. Once inside the fruit, she lays eggs in it, also dropping pollen from the last fig tree she has visited as she dances her legs upon the fruit's internal flowers. Then, her tasks are finished. Wingless, she gives up her life and dies inside the fruit which absorbs her body in its flower, which blooms inside of the fruit. In the meantime, her eggs hatch, and the male wasps, born without wings and never to leave the fig fruit, impregnate the newly hatched female wasp and help burrow a way out of the fruit for her. She goes on to continue the cycle of life, dropping her eggs and pollen into the next fruit tree. But the fig fruit absorbs into its ripened body the carcass of the queen wasp, as well as the newly hatched male wasps that helped set the new queen wasp on her journey to ripen the next fruit.

Things are not always what they may seem. Within the sweet and tender flesh of a fig lies the story of death, resurrection, and new birth. Within a stable of Bethlehem lies a story of birth, death, and resurrection. Within each of our lives, aren't there also stories about birth, and death-- but also about resurrection? As we consider the landscape of our times, and the

landscape of our lives, may this Advent season help us to uncover the signs of light in the darkness and hope in the face of fear. May these signs help us to find the home we have been homesick for, the home which is the kingdom-- or *kindom*-- of God. This home is much nearer than we know.