

1 Advent B December 3, 2017

Don't Look Down

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Best-selling author, pastor, preacher and teacher John Ortberg writes in his book *If You Want to Walk on Water You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, about the very first time he went downhill skiing. Thanks to the generosity of a friend who gave a weekend ski package to John and his wife, his first downhill ski trip was to the Swiss Alps. While John had never gone downhill skiing before, his wife, Nancy, was an avid skier and she suggested John try the bunny hill before taking any serious runs. After a few trips down the easy hill, John proclaimed himself ready for something more adventurous, so the two of them got on a ski lift and headed up a mountain. John's wife Nancy may have been an experienced skier, but she was, and as I understand still is, terribly afraid of heights. And this particular ski lift went up pretty high pretty fast which caused Nancy to wrap herself tightly around the pole between her and John. With trembling in her voice, she proclaimed to her husband that she loved him very much, but that particular pole was hers and if he so much as touched that pole he would meet Jesus that day. Being a supportive husband, John looked at his wife, shrugged, and said the only words of wisdom he had at the time: "Don't look down." He isn't very clear in his account if these words were helpful to his wife at the time or not.

After the chair lift, John and his wife had to take what is called a T-bar the rest of the way up the mountain. They hadn't been on the T-bar very long when they both fell off into deep snow where, unable to get up, they laid waiting for the legendary St. Bernard to come and rescue them. The dog never showed, however, John recalled that several skiers still on the T-bar shouted advice to them in German, but the only word he could make out was the word: "dummkopf".

Finally, a couple either fell off the T-bar or jumped off out of pity and helped pull John and his wife out of the snow, then guided them through hip-deep snow for an hour to the nearest ski slope. When they got there, John noticed the slope was marked with not only a black diamond, but also with a skull and crossbones. He also noticed the angle of the ski slope appeared to go downhill at an 85-degree angle. It was at that point that John received the only skiing lesson in his life. Hans, the name of the man who helped John and his wife get to that slope spoke some English and noticed John's fear and said words that were achingly familiar to John: "Don't look down. You will be frightened by the slope and overwhelmed by the distance. When new skiers look down, they panic, and when they face straight ahead on a slope this steep..." here Hans stopped talking, made a whistling sound and a motion with his hands that John did find encouraging. Then Hans went on, "I think you can make it. Just remember one thing: Don't look down."

John Ortberg goes on to say that “Don’t look down” became his number one rule of life. He did not look down for anything. He wrote that children would ski between his legs to tempt him to watch them, but he didn’t look down. People would ski past him, take the lift up, then ski past him again just to see how many times they could lap him. But he didn’t look down. He writes he probably pulled off the ugliest ski run the Swiss Alps has ever seen, but he did get down the steep hill in one piece by doing one thing right: he didn’t look down. So maybe his wife was right, although John didn’t touch the pole on the ski lift, he did meet Jesus that day; in the kindness of a man named Hans who gave him not just a good skiing lesson but an Advent lesson: Don’t look down.

When I read the section from Mark’s Gospel we just heard, it seems to me Jesus was giving a similar message to his followers when he warned them to keep awake. This section of Mark’s Gospel is often called the “Little Apocalypse” because it seems to be about the second coming of Christ, what some folks call the end of the world. Other scholars tell us today’s Gospel reading is not apocalyptic, but is instead part of Jesus’ farewell address to his followers where the author of Mark is using post-resurrection imagery to help address the changes that his audience of the time could see coming; namely the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Scholars tell us this was an incredibly important event in the life of the Jewish people, and remember that at first many of Jesus’ followers were Jewish. To them the destruction of the Temple would be so terrible, so awful, that it would feel like the end of the world. History tells us the world kept going after the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, but for Jewish people life would never be same. So the message of today’s Gospel reading could simply be that the author of Mark was using the words of Jesus to encourage his audience to have courage to face the difficult changes that were coming by not getting distracted by the discouraging, disheartening, and frightening events that might feel like the world is ending, but life will go on. In other words, it sounds to me like Jesus is saying, “Don’t look down.” There will be suffering, there will be people trying to convince others the world is ending, but these are distractions, and you can make it through if you don’t look down.

That is a hopeful message for the people of that time. And one of the things I love about the scriptures is that while they were written in a specific time, they are in essence timeless, and have the same hopeful message for those of us who are following Jesus today.

While we may not have the destruction of the Temple to worry about, there is little doubt we are living in times of cultural change. These changes and their signs, are all around us, some are interpreted as good, some as bad, but I hear more and more people from all walks of life make comments like, “The world is going to hell in a handbasket,” or “I don’t think we are going to make it through.” Or “This has got to be the end.” Whether the folks who share these feelings are speaking about changes in

politics, in government, in tax reform, in gender roles, in the church, in their local communities, in their personal lives, there is no doubt there has been plenty of loss: loss of jobs, loss of a way of life, loss of the way things used to be, loss of family and friends, and while none of these losses means the world is ending, for those suffering the loss it can certainly feel like the end of their world at times. And in a way, it is the end of the world they knew. But it doesn't mean that life doesn't go on. And while we might know of people who have made it through tough times to better ones the Person who takes us all the way through the hardest loss to new life is Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection show us that not even death can prevent God from being with us in the person of Jesus. And that is the message of hope for all of us today.

Today is also the first day in the season of Advent; which is often described as a time to prepare for Christmas and to remind us that we are waiting for Christ who came to us in humility as a baby to come to us again, this time in glory as our judge. Every first day in Advent, the readings sound more like an ending than a beginning, which is quite in line with resurrection theology, when you think about it, because one of the things Jesus' resurrection shows us is that every ending is just the other side of a beginning, and therefore every beginning is also the other side of an ending. Endings and beginnings can't be separated. Today's Gospel reminds us that endings and beginnings can both be uncomfortable, and can feel like the end of the world, especially if we allow ourselves to get distracted by all the things that can accompany such changes: like the acts of violence we see on the news, or the drama of family and friends, just as a few examples.

That is where the season of Advent and its message of hope can be a balm to our hearts, minds, and souls that might feel as frightened, panicked or overwhelmed as John Ortberg at the top of the steep ski slope: Don't look down. We can make it through if we can remember to not let the distractions keep us from focusing on Jesus, who shows us no change is the end of the world.

While Advent reminds us Jesus is coming again in glory, it also offers us the opportunity to pay attention and look for the Presence of Christ in the world around us, so that we will know him when he comes again. Jesus can be present in unexpected acts of kindness, or in the listening presence of a friend, in acts of generosity, in conversations that are brave enough to explore issues of faith and life, in simply noticing the person who most people simply pass by, in the Sacrament of Holy Communion or helping a first-time skier make down a challenging ski slope. There are other ways Jesus continues to come into our daily lives, and sometimes it is our actions that help others see the Love of God Jesus came and continues to come and make known. I know this

can be hard to do during a season that is chock full of additional distractions required for holiday preparation, and can be especially hard for many for whom this time of year is a painful reminder of the losses they have experienced. Which is why we need a season that gives us permission to keep our focus on Jesus, no matter what.

Perhaps that is a good way to start this season of Advent today; to think about John Ortberg's ugly but successful ski run as a reminder that no matter what happens, Don't Look Down. This doesn't mean we are unaware of what is going on around us, just the opposite is true, we still need to be aware, to pay attention to what is happening in our families, communities, church, school, government etc. We just need to avoid being distracted by them.

Maybe this week, in order to help us keep our focus on Jesus, we could write the words: "Don't look down" on a post it note or some other piece of paper and tape it to our door so that we see the reminder before going out into every day. Or maybe the note that reads Don't Look Down needs to be taped to our computer, device, phone, or TV. Instead of a note, perhaps the best way for some of us to keep the focus on Jesus is to light a candle, whether it is on an Advent wreath like we have in here in church, or a candle in our chapel, or just a candle we have at home, and sit a moment in prayer. I know this sounds like a small thing to do, especially in the face of so many big changes – perhaps too small a thing to make any significant difference, but maybe that is how significant differences are made: with small beginnings.

However each of us chooses to observe the season of Advent, I hope that despite whatever happens, whatever news stories continue to bombard us, or situations at school or work we have to work through, financial struggles we might face, losses we might be living with, I hope we all remember, Jesus is with us, whether we recognize him or not, and he believes we can get through, we just have to remember one thing: Don't Look Down.