

1 Advent B November 29, 2020
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Don't Look Down
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Happy New Year! While we still have a few weeks of the calendar year to go, for the Church, today is the start of a new year, or I should say, a new church year. No matter what type of calendar you use: academic, financial, lunar, or the church calendar, every new year begins with a sense of freshness, possibility, and hope for what is yet to come. Academic years begin with excitement and expectation, which we see here at Church of the Good Shepherd when classes begin for Ohio University in the fall. And I suspect pretty much everyone feels that new school year excitement no matter their age or school they attend. Financial years begin with looking ahead in anticipation of good things happening in the world of business and economy, eager to make up for any losses in the past. New Year's Eve parties are all about the expectation of a better year ahead, that is what all the rituals and ringing in the new year are about. The Church also begins its new year looking forward in hope, not just for the next 365 days, but for longer and farther. The hope we begin the year with isn't the hope of financial, academic, or personal success. The hope we are reminded of as the year begins is the hope Jesus promises and commands us to watch for and wait for in this morning's gospel.

This hope is manifesting right now, as you watch the video of this sermon, because I have the delight of sharing this sermon with two parishes that mean so very much to me: St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Waupaca, Wisconsin, the parish that I was born in, baptized, confirmed, served as acolyte since I was ten years old, served on vestry, altar guild, worked as Children's Formation Director, and where I was raised up to ordination to the priesthood; and Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Athens, Ohio in the Diocese of Southern Ohio where I am Rector and Convener of the Campus Ministry Collaborative in the Diocese. Today I am keenly aware of the firmness of my roots and at the same time a growing ministry all of which embodies the incarnate love of God in Christ here on earth. I am grateful for the technology that allows us to share this connection today. The pandemic has caused a great deal of separation, which is sad and difficult, and it is also giving us opportunities to creatively form new and strengthen old connections, reminding us of one of the things I love about the Episcopal Church: how we exist under a large, encompassing umbrella of diversity of locations and worship styles. We are different and the same. And I am so happy to share this First Sunday in the Advent Season with two parishes that are so very dear to me.

At first glance the Gospel reading we have this morning from Mark's Gospel doesn't sound all that hopeful or comforting with all that talk of suffering, darkness caused by the sun and moon refusing to shine and stars falling to earth. Today's Gospel seems to be filled with the loss of things we take for granted like a shining sun, as well as instability and uncertainty as no one knows when the events Jesus talked about will happen.

Biblical scholars and commentators like to remind us today's Gospel reading from Mark is a specific genre called *apocalyptic literature*. Some of you might be thinking we've had enough apocalyptic events in real life this year, but only in popular culture does "apocalyptic" mean complete destruction and end times. The purpose of apocalyptic literature, those scholars and commentators tell us, is to reveal the truth and to bring hope to desperate, suffering people by focusing on the presence of God who is even now, even in all the events of 2020, in our midst, in Ohio and Wisconsin and everywhere else.

Writer and preacher John Ortberg has a perfect story to help us understand this. It is a story I have told before, often in sermons I preach on the first Sunday in Advent, which means some of you have probably heard this story before, maybe even more than once. But I'm not going to apologize for telling it again. I don't remember where I heard it, but I remember someone once saying, "stories are like old friends, you have to visit them every now and then to see how they are doing." I believe stories are always waiting for us, waiting for when we need them again. This is one of those stories. And during a year where we have had to adapt to so many new things, maybe an old story is exactly what we need.

It starts with a ski trip John Ortberg took with his wife to the Swiss Alps. John's wife was an expert skier. John was not. After a few trips down the bunny hill, John felt the confidence to try something a bit more challenging. So, he and his wife took the ski lift to the next level, and then had to ride something called a T-bar, which they fell off before reaching their destination. John recalls they laid in the deep soft snow waiting for a St. Bernard that never showed up. Instead they were rescued by a man named Hans who jumped off the T-bar, helped them up, and led them through deep snow to the nearest slope. John couldn't help but notice the slope was marked with a sign that included the symbol of a black diamond and another symbol of skull and crossbones. He also noticed the "slope" went downhill at about an 85-degree angle. He couldn't see the bottom, just the incredibly steep slope going on and on.

That is when John received what he said is his first and only skiing lesson and I believe is really good guidance: “Don’t look down,” Hans said, “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 John tells the story by saying Hans could only get his point across by making a whistling sound and a hand motion that was not encouraging. When Hans did speak again, he said, “I think you can make it. Just remember one thing: Don’t look down.”

John said “Don’t look down” became the number one rule in his life and he didn’t look down for anything. He claims to have made the ugliest ski run in the history of the sport, going along clumsily and so slowly some skiers would ski past him, take the lift back up, just to ski past him again. Small children would try to ski under his legs tempting him to break his focus. But no matter what happened, no matter what distractions were presented, John got one thing right: he didn’t look down. And that, he claims, is how he got to the bottom of the hill that day.

Today’s Gospel reminds me of the black diamond skull and crossbones ski run John Ortberg found himself faced with. Jesus mentions many things that sound distressing, concerning, and frightening. And if we focus only of them, we surely will not make it through. Jesus also warns his listeners and those of us reading the Gospel today to pay attention, to keep awake, to be aware of signs of life like a fig tree growing in the midst of it all. I’m pretty sure Jesus isn’t telling us to refrain from sleeping or rest when he says to stay awake, I believe that is Jesus’ way of saying “Don’t look down.”

There will be times in life, Jesus seems to be warning us, when our lives resemble that skull and crossbones ski slope and will be disrupted by divisions, changes, and circumstances beyond our control. Those times will be frightening. They will be disconcerting. Like today’s Gospel suggests, such events may reveal things about our lives our country or community or church we didn’t notice before, or didn’t want to notice, but are true just the same. The truth will be just as difficult to face as all the other disruptions. To me, this year with the pandemic which is causing loss of lives, loss of quality of lives, loss of employment and disruption of pretty much every institution like schools, churches, government, and businesses, a contentious election, and continued racial injustice makes today’s Gospel seem much more relatable than previous years. Like the Gospel and the steep ski slope, we can’t see the end of all of it from here. If ever we needed the reminder “Don’t look down”, this is the time.

Not looking down isn't permission to ignore those discomforting truths and disruptions or pretend they don't exist. As he practiced not looking down as he made his slow and clumsy way down the steep ski slope, John Ortberg still had to be aware of obstacles and distractions, otherwise they could have caused him to fall. Not looking down means being aware of what is revealed, so that we can adapt and adjust to them while staying true to our calling to follow Jesus. Truth be told, 2020 has also been a year when I've felt God call us all to respond to these disruptions with creativity, care and love for our neighbors that has made me aware of the incarnate, in-flesh-ment of God in our midst more than ever before.

Here at Church of the Good Shepherd, after the pandemic caused lockdowns, once we started focusing on what we could do instead of what we couldn't, we found new ways reach out to our neighbors in love that also help lower the risk of transmitting the virus. Mask wearing is mandatory on church property, even outside. We modified our free lunch ministry and coffee shop ministry by making them outdoors and to-go only. We are giving away free cotton reusable and washable face masks by packaging them in small see through plastic bags and hanging them from the branches of a tree in our church yard we are calling the "Tree of Giving." It may not be the fig tree Jesus mentioned today, but it will do for showing our neighbors God's love in a pandemic. These are ways we, like John Ortberg on that black diamond skull and crossbones ski slope aren't looking down. Instead, we are keeping our focus on Jesus and the ways he is still calling us to be present, to embody his love in the world.

That is where hope is. That is what hope is. It is refusing to look down even when it looks or feels overwhelming because it seems like the world we've grown comfortable with is ending. Resurrection life reminds us of the deeper truth that nothing ever ends, because endings are the stuff God loves to redeem.

I don't know how you are feeling this first day in the new Church year, this first day in the season of Advent. Perhaps you are feeling the frustration of the ongoing pandemic. Maybe you are grieving the loss of someone close to you or know someone who is grieving. Maybe you are frightened for the future, at what we cannot know or control nor are able to see the end of from here. Maybe you feel as overwhelmed as John Ortberg looking down a steep ski slope. Maybe you feel optimism. Maybe you feel weary. However you feel, the advice of Jesus and Hans is good advice for today and for this unique time in history we are living in. No matter what happens, no matter what changes or continues to change, no matter what, don't look down.

Maybe we could start this new Church year by writing the words “Don’t Look Down” on a piece of paper and put it on the door before we leave our homes, or on a desk or table, someplace we can see the reminder to look for and keep focused on how God is present with us right now. Whether that is in a free face mask hanging on a tree, the many people who wear face masks in public to do their part to slow the spread of the virus, the kindness of a stranger, the friend who reaches out with a phone call or a card, in the beauty of the snow or falling leaves, the doctor who diagnoses a health problem, the prayers of friends and family, the technology that allows us to be together when we are apart, there are so many ways the love of God in Christ can and does manifest in the world, and may be calling us to participate in so hope can be seen by others.

While so many new years begin with a new hope, ours is the same hope every year: the hope that keeps us from looking down, the hope of Jesus who is here and at the same time will return to restore all the world to God’s purpose and dream for us all, who will redeem all suffering and fear. For this, we, along with the world, wait and hope. This hope is what can and will help us get through this time together. I know we can do this. We will reach the bottom of this long, steep slope together. Just remember, don’t look down.