

## THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 3, 2023

ISAIAH 64:1-9 | PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19 | 1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9 | MARK 13:24-37

Advent is the best liturgical season. It has the best readings. It has the best hymns. It's when our sanctuary looks the best with the wreaths and these nice blue paraments. It's also a short enough season that I can try to do a little sermon series. Last year, some of you may remember we did four weeks about James Martin's book *Learning to Pray*. This year, I'm going to try to put our readings in conversation with some other voices from the Christian tradition. And instead of giving you the big names like Martin Luther and Mother Teresa, I'm going to try to introduce you to some new people. And we'll see what these "deep cut" saints can teach us about how Christ encounters us and how we encounter others.

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There's an interesting contrast in today's readings from Isaiah and St. Mark's gospel. In today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet imagines what it will be like when God acts. It will be like the heavens being torn open. It will be like the mountains quaking. It will be like a fire that causes the waters of the earth to boil. How will you know when the day of the Lord is here? Isaiah says, *Trust me. You'll know*. When God is at work, you won't miss it.

But in today's gospel reading, Jesus offers a different interpretation. "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near." Unlike Isaiah, Jesus says, *Well, maybe you won't know. Maybe it won't be obvious. The sky won't split in two. The mountains won't quake. It will be something small, something hidden, something obscure or on the margins*. Unlike Isaiah, Mark's Jesus says that you really could miss it. And so you need to pay attention.

The practice of paying attention is a theme that comes up a lot of Simone Weil's writing.<sup>1</sup> Weil is someone that I've probably quoted in homilies before. She was born to a secular Jewish family in France in 1909. She died when she was in her early thirties. And while we don't have time to go into her entire biography, it's worth knowing that she lived an incredibly intense life. And that intensity often led her to make decisions that seemed strange to the people around her. For example, when she was in her twenties, she had an experience of Jesus during prayer that led her to Christian practice. But she refused to convert to Christianity because she believed she would be closer to Jesus by being in solidarity with those outside the institutional church. And she applies that same kind of intensity and counter-intuitiveness to her thinking about attention.

I don't know about you, but my experience of attention is that I don't have much of it. Even worse, I feel like I used to have more. But increasingly, I feel myself drifting in and out of things. Even as I'm trying to write this homily about profound things, I find myself periodically drifting off and wondering about things like who won the Timberwolves game last night.

I imagine many of you have this same feeling. And there are no shortage of books and think pieces and—God knows—podcasts about why we find it so hard to pay attention, how we can get better at paying attention, and why we need to get better at paying attention. Usually goes something like this. We find it hard to pay attention because we live with so many distractions. We can get better at paying attention with some exercises or lifehacks. And once we learn how to pay

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<sup>1</sup> The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy has a good but very long entry on Weil. A good one-volume anthology is Simone Weil, *Simone Weil: Writings Selected with an Introduction by Eire O. Springsted* (Orbis Books, 1998).

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attention, we can be more efficient and productive. Imagine how much faster I could write this homily if I could stop thinking about box scores.

But Weil takes this in a different direction. And says that attention isn't like a muscle that's gotten out of shape. And the problem isn't that we drift in and out of things. Attention, she says, is our ability to focus completely on others instead of our own experience. What prevents us from paying attention isn't distraction. It's ego. It's needing to have everything be about me. For Weil, to pay attention means "to empty ourselves of our false divinity... to give up being the center of the world in imagination." To pay attention means to give up being the center.

Let's try to think about what this might look like. Imagine for a moment that you got a bad piece of news. Bad health diagnosis, bad relationship thing, bad job news, whatever it is. And afterward, you met up with a friend for lunch, and you told them about this terrible, potentially life-altering thing that was happening to you. And your friend said, "Well, something bad happened to me, too. I forgot to use fabric softener. And now this shirt kind of itches." Your friend might be paying attention. But they wouldn't really be paying attention to you.

For Weil, attention means giving other people the space to be their full selves. To see them not as just people who are here to fill my needs or make me feel a certain way or to set up the anecdote that I want to talk about. But to encounter others as people with integrity and wholeness independent from our own lives. So, as Weil writes, "The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say, 'What are you going through?'" How would you feel if your friend asked you that? My hunch is that even if they can't fix your problems, you would still feel loved. Because—Weil again—"attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."

It's easy to offer people advice and say, *Look at this great advice I gave you*. It's easy to give people gifts and say, *Look at this great gift I gave you*. And it's easy to pretend to listen and say, *Well, let me tell you what happened to me*. It's much more difficult to say, *I'll be here. So tell me more about you*.

So often, our default setting is to place ourselves at the center of every story. *What does this mean for me?* But when we get so taken by our own interests and agendas, our vision of the world gets dangerously narrow and self-serving. And if we're looking for God's presence among us, it'll probably take an Isaiah-sized intervention to get our attention.

But we are not the center of the story. Christ is. And that frees us up from having to protect our position or defend our own ego. And it liberates us to accept Jesus's invites us to see God at work in more subtle ways and unexpected places, too. On the margins. Among the forgotten. Even—why not?—in a manger in Bethlehem.

And when the Holy Spirit opens our hearts and enables us to pay attention, to really see and care for our neighbors free of our own projections about and desires for them, we begin to see traces of God's lovingkindness in all the places we used to overlook.

Attention really is the purest form of generosity. Not because it makes us feel good. Certainly not because it makes us more productive. But because it allows us to see the love of God at work all around us. And wherever the love of God is, Jesus tells us, a new world is possible.

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