

ADVENT ONE, YEAR C, NOVEMBER 28, 2021

At the National Cathedral in Washington DC they have several gardens all over the grounds that have a variety of plants, trees and herbs. In particular there is a fig tree that is beside the Herb Cottage. This fig tree has an interesting history. It has been at the cathedral for close to 40 years and is called the Madonna Fig tree. In that time the tree has died twice right down to the ground due to extreme cold. When that happened the tree was cut down flush to see if it would re-sprout and it did. Then ten years ago when the cathedral was under construction there was a crane collapse and the tree was smashed by the boom. Amazingly the tree survived.

It is quite a story of perseverance! In spite of all the obstacles thrown in its way—two hard winters and a crane collapse- the Cathedral's fig tree will not be daunted in its mission to produce what are some of the best-tasting figs in the region. In today's Gospel Jesus says: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."

Luke's words in our Advent Scripture for today are written to people living with the kind of darkness and danger and despair that many people are living with every day. And what Jesus is saying to them and to us is this: Bad things happen. And as we all know, bad things happen to good people. Earthquakes happen, terrorism, wars and famine happen, children die and cancer kills, but bad things are never the final word.

During his 27 years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela refused to give in to the bad things. In his autobiography, Mandela wrote:

I have found that one can bear the unbearable if one can keep spirits strong even when the body is being tested. Strong convictions are the secret of surviving deprivation. Your spirit can be full even when your stomach is empty. I always knew that some day I would once again feel the grass under my feet and walk in the sunshine as a free man. I am fundamentally an optimist. Part of being an optimist is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward."

Again and again throughout scripture God uses the darkness to kindle the light. God transforms the tomb of death into the womb of new life. And so even though bad things happen to good people, we live with the hope and the conviction that God is with us, and Jesus taught us how to live in this darkness--how to wait, how to stay alert, how to live moral, disciplined lives. Because, as the people of God, for better or worse, we are the ones who bear Christ's hope for the world. Hope cannot be bought and wrapped and put under a Christmas tree. Hope cannot be squirreled away in a stock portfolio for safekeeping. Hope cannot be won with bombs or bullets or 21st-century artillery. The hope we carry--God's promise of God's coming again and again and again--this hope is the birthright of God's whole, weary, wonderful world.

That brings me back to the fig tree. The Cathedral's Madonna fig tree at first glance is a story of miraculous survival and of life's refusal to be defeated. And it is that. But in the light of Jesus' suggestion that we read the fig tree for signs of what God is up to, I see it as something more. The fig tree refuses to die because it refuses to operate on the world's expectations. The Madonna fig still has life to give and fruit to bear. Winters and crane collapses are nothing when they come up against the working out of a gracious purpose. If that can be true for a fig tree, how much more can it be for you and me?

What finally matters is the Christian hope, and what we can confidently trust is that God will make that hope real. In this morning's collect we heard, Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light...." The armor of light - God's power and glory - is our help and strength. We can look at ourselves and our world and God's light helps us to see what needs to be cast away.

If we're going to fill our hearts with love, we need to cast away the hatred and fear that so often fill our hearts. If we're going to love others, we need to cast away selfishness and anger and indifference. If we're going to work for a world in which love can thrive, we need to cast away oppression, violence, and degradation.

In a world that so often seems to be spinning out of control, it would be easy to be overwhelmed by the evil we see. No one of us can solve the great problems of the world, but we can change the world one life at a time, beginning in our own hearts.

I think this story that took place 14 years ago perfectly illustrates this. It was written by Naomi Shihab Nye who is a poet. She writes; "Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Well—one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. "Help," said the flight agent. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke haltingly in Arabic. The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, "No, we're fine, you'll get there, just late, who is picking you up? Let's call him."

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade *mamool* cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—from her bag—and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out free apple juice from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country travelling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying

of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”

Advent is a time for hopeful waiting and watching. Christmas will come, no matter what we do to prepare for it. But to make ourselves ready, let us remember that what we really hope for at Christmas is what we have already seen in the life of Jesus and in the expressions of human compassion and mercy we know now in the fabric of our lives. Look to the fig tree. Jesus is coming toward us. As Christmas approaches, let’s use this graceful Advent season to be hopeful and full of compassion and mercy. Amen.