

Should I fear the future?

Part 1 of a series: Steady now. There's hope for us. There really will be something to celebrate!

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, November 28, 2010: The First Sunday of Advent.
Based on Matthew 24:36-44.*

*Coming up: Advent 2/Crushed by expectation./Isaiah 11:1-10.
Advent 3/When patience is not enough./James 5:7-10.
Advent 4/Christmas: too much intimacy?/Matthew 1:18-25*

Welcome to the season of Advent. A little counter-cultural, maybe even a counter-intuitive season the Church has maintained for a long time. In our time, it's a time of expectation and stress. So, to help you cope with that madness, we've cobbled together what we hope will be a coherent series of four sermons for these four Sundays.

One source of anxiety, bordering on fear, for all of us is the superabundance of information and advice that assaults us every day. The morning paper—which is now a sort of quaint idea—used to be filled with news (along with a little leavening of sports, comics, weather and maybe a hint or two from Heloise).

Now, newspapers, to compete, have largely re-branded themselves as organs of something called “news you can use.” That leads to something like this: How to raise your children in a hostile environment. How to forestall the effects of aging on your body. How to revise your entire life-long investment strategy (which made me think in Biblical terms—it's too late!) How to get in or out of the real estate market, how to cut up your turkey into parts so that they'll bake at different temperatures and nothing will be dry. And, of course, the background fear that now sometimes comes into the foreground: is the terror alert red or orange or yellow or orange?—along with the new fears: shall I choose radiation or intrusive body pat-downs at the airport?

In all of this, it's harder to come by cultivation of your inner values—what we all have, which is an inner life, or the search for meaning. That inner quality is, I think, harder to come by. Fear gets in the way. Even if you find an opening to inner life on paper, online, or from a teacher, you're liable also to find anxiety.

One reason: often the loudest voices on the spiritual side are themselves the most anxious. They're likely to be the most determined to work for your attention. Those voices—and I'd have to admit they're backed by major sections of the Bible—tell you this: Things are worse than you think. The end of the world is near. And as such, these questions are appropriate. Do you believe in God? How are you in your relationship with God? Are you a right believer? Will you be saved? Or—and there are 46 million copies of books under this title—*Will you be left behind?*

If you heard the gospel this morning, that's right there—the left behind bit, I mean: Jesus said to the disciples, “But about that day and hour no one knows.”

That was his clear way of saying, “Don't worry about it.” *You're worried about a lot of things—you have some legitimate worries, don't worry about that.* And, by extension, *don't give power to people who claim they know that. They don't know what they're talking about.*

I had a high school teacher who challenged us with difficult material. Sometimes he'd reel off a lot of dense stuff, and then he'd say, “I can't do your work for you, but I can tell you this . . .” At those words, we all leaned forward to listen. We knew we were about to hear either something that was going to be on the quiz, or at least a formula for working ourselves through that hard material. In other words, we not only thought we'd hear something that would save us a lot of work, but might even save us.

I'll say to you now: I can't do your work, but I can say this: If a search for a spiritual life or truth, or meaning or growth means something to you; if you hear voices that increase your fear, you are not hearing Jesus. You are not hearing the voice of God.

When you hear voices claiming to know that it's all over, you're not hearing the voice of the one who said “you can't add one hour to your life by worry.” (Matt. 6:27) In fact, as he said, “about that day and hour, no one knows.”

I can also tell you this—the voice of Jesus which, at least by implication, draws us together here—that voice says that *nobody gets left behind.* That voice says that no matter what your problems and your worries, you matter. You are valued. There's a lot of living and loving that you can do, no matter how worried you are.

And I can also tell you this: beware of those who make you feel more afraid than you already are. A wise person once said, “When others want power, when they want people to do their will, they play to your fear.” I believe in a Christian tradition that opens up some distance

between us and those ordinary fears. Of course, I also know that we are wired to fear certain things for our own safety. That's appropriate fear, and I have no argument with its reality.

The question is, "What are your legitimate fears?" Real religion doesn't magnify them. Real religion helps you find some solid ground on which to stand and *deal* with fear. Remember, Jesus lived in a time of great fear. Living among a people crushed by an economic system, by civil repression, by the lively memories of terrible destruction that foreign powers could do to its buildings, its psyche and its religion, the notable thing about Jesus is how he did *not* participate in that fear-mongering. He stood singularly apart from it and instead, offered a glimpse of a new way to live. He called it the "kingdom of God." He said it had begun. He taught that it required our attention, and, often, our work.

Of course, he lived for and embodied real risk himself. He risked visibly accepting everyone as an equal child of God—big risk in a world that likes to separate and revalue everything. He said that every child of God is infinitely valuable and deserves respect. He risked welcoming the stranger. He lived the risk of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, offering help and healing to those who needed them.

In Jesus, we see that the road to our own self-fulfillment, to discovering who we really are, to continuing to grow is to be non-anxiously part of a community that, like this one, believes that that's a risk and a search we can undertake. And, taking it, we'll find something.

Instead of saying, have fear that you'll be left behind, he said "Seek and you will find. Ask and it will be given to you. Knock and the door will be opened." The kingdom, the future, he saw coming is not a kingdom of fear. It's an invitation to adventure and opportunity.

Without a strong center—without being in touch with the place of depth within—you're likely to fear the wrong things or to fear the right things for the wrong reason. That's why spiritual growth is so important. Growth begins when you acknowledge an appetite within—even if it's just an appetite that wants to know more and be more apart of the lives of other people who are on the same spiritual path.

The Bible is an epic, a long connected narrative, and Jesus emerged as a distinct figure in that long narrative because he was the one who was not caught up in the fear. Instead, he defied it.

Now the beauty of that long narrative is just that—its length, its sweep through history—and not its *every* detail and *every* claim. You know and I know that there are confusing and contradictory claims in the Bible. It was, after all, the inspired work of different people in different times and places to answer different questions. Its beauty is the long arc of its meaning: Our creation, our relationship to that creation, our struggle to sort out the good uses of our free will, our ability to repent—that is to rethink and start again. We find real meaning in its stories of the power of love freely given, the mystery of how to begin to regard each other with dignity and worth, and the gradual working out of a just and loving community in which every person can flower.

Interestingly, recent brain research has verified that the human person is hard-wired to turn ourselves into stories. It turns out there's a part of the brain that governs this inner-narrative, the story you tell about yourself. Sometimes you tell this story to other people. Often you tell it to yourself—to help hold on and to make sense of things.

The challenge of spiritual growth is to connect that voice with the voice of a reliable tradition, a narrative that doesn't tie you to fear but liberates you from fear. One that sorts out real fears from ones that can crush your spirit.

I once did some time with a therapist who said, early in the therapy, "I'll bet I can make you more anxious than you can make me." I had to laugh, and with the laugh I felt myself relax and find a little openness that I didn't have at the beginning, and I was able to do some really productive work.

Jesus is one whose voice can join with that little inner voice of yours in that relaxing, even liberating spirit. It's in that sense that we repeat the ancient, traditional language of Advent: "Wake up—stay alert." Listen to that liberating voice of Jesus. And when you do, you will find that you are getting more than the nightly news of little horrors. And far more than news you can use. You will have found the Good News: *Fear not*.

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