

In our gospel story today, Jesus broadcasts an urgent alarm, declaring to his hearers, in apocalyptic language that people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. Simply put, creation is falling apart; Genesis is being reversed, the lamps, which God hung in the sky, to provide light and life, are now sending out alarms foretelling the end of the world as we know it. The scene is frightening, bold, and startling. All is not well for the souls of any of us who can imagine such a scene, when our universe is shaken, when the way we have put our lives together, the plans we have formulated and are eagerly implementing, come crashing down around us.

Oh how we wish this was not to be true.

Oh how we wish calamity would not be a part of our life.

Oh how we wish our hearts would not be worn raw by the continual abrasion of hatred.

Oh how we wish our spirits would not be so crushed beneath the weight of so much sadness and grief.

Oh how we wish Jesus' words of the collapse of our lives, as we know them, and the downfall of our world as has been entrusted to us, were not to be true.

Oh how much rather we wish our lives would all be happy and easy. Oh how we wish that every part of our lives we ran toward, every root desire we hold, every branch of our love, which we extend to others, every fruit we dare to bear; would stand in the light and grow more alive, and our souls would be well, always. But that's not the reality we know, nor the reality Jesus knew.

The truth of our lives is that there will be parts which will be carelessly bent or broken off by another's negligence, there will be outpourings of love which will be pruned by our own anger, there will be dry spells in our lives of imagination and creativity, and our hope, at times, will be splintered by the ice storms of another's verbal attack, and our tendency can be to stay there, where life appears to be dead forever, because of the calamity and collapse which has happened around us.

But Jesus tells us something else this morning, "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."

The force of new life, which we so readily recognize in the tender light green sprouts, which emerge from the tips of the twigs of the fig tree, is also present in the collapse of the world as we know it. That's a pretty amazing statement: in the midst of calamity, collapse and destruction, the force of new life exists. It doesn't appear as a response to what has happened, but what may appear as frightening, bold, and startling, actually holds within it the seeds of the invitation to the kingdom, which is near at hand.

It is this life force, this Kingdom of God come near, this divine love, this presence of Christ planted deep within our souls, which nourishes, supports, stabilizes, and energizes us, and is the still point in a world that is constantly changing.

This is the message for us today. As the seasons of life turn, we, like the fig tree, will push forth new life, for there is always a force within us, drawing us with a source of strength and life, beyond which we could imagine, into what appears to us to be faith shaking and soul-shattering within our own being, or into what appears to be us to dry, damaged or dead relationships, or into what appears to be confounding, confusing, and chaotic events in the news. There is a life force, set within us, which is the still point in a world that is constantly changing. It is Christ.

Fortified through our baptism, nourished by The Holy Eucharist, this life-giving force runs strong and deep, and enables us to not only endure and survive the collapse of what seems known to us, but enables us to actually embrace it, for we know, somehow in God's mercy, new life is emerging from it.

We can make a choice to stay in the dead and destroyed parts of our life. We can give ourselves over to the collapsing world around us, and we will go down with it. In the midst of the disruption and destruction around us, fear and uncertainty can be the end, rather than hope.

Or we can choose to lean into the destruction, so as to uncover the budding of new leaves in our life. We can clasp onto the chaos thrust upon us when a beloved one dies, and yet when our grief is deep and holy, we can heal and find new life and love; we can bend our own will toward God's, when we bottom out and give ourselves over to a higher power, and we can find restarted life; we can tend to our own soul when we look honestly at the falseness of who we have become, and we can find renewed life; we can cradle vulnerability in our soul, when we allow a strength greater than our own to shape our lives, and we can find restored life.

Our ability to survive and embrace collapse in our world depends upon knowing when and how to steep ourselves into and draw nourishment from the life-giving force of Christ.

We must guard our spirit and allow the strength of Christ to move through our bodies, bringing life to each part of it. This requires spiritual sensitivity and attentiveness.

This is what Advent is all about. A time to pull deep inside, a time to loosen the soil around our stuck soul, a time to rip out the weeds of worry and discontent, a time to soak deeply into the nourishment of prayer and vigilance, so that when, not if, but when our world collapses a bit or a lot around us, when our day doesn't

offer up the peace or sunshine we had imagined, but settles us down in darkness, we will know what is the true still point in a world constantly changing: Christ.

For in the darkness, seeds awake and green shoots unfurl toward the light. When our roots run deep into the place of God and when we allow Christ's love to water them, we bloom where we are planted, turning our faces toward the sun. And we open our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope. This is what the season of Advent is all about.

Amen.