

December 22, 2019
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

It was sometime in early fall that Jakki and I discovered the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. I had seen occasional mentions in the news about a show set in the 1980s—it had gotten good buzz for its well-created retro vibe. I finally checked it out, only to discover to my horror that it's a horror show. That's a genre I avoid but my wife Jakki occasionally enjoys. As an early Halloween gift to her, I agreed to sample an episode. To my surprise, I quite enjoyed it, in part because it's not very horrific. The action revolves around a klatch of nerdy middle schoolers and seems meant for that age group: less scary than spooky, less violent than surprising, less gory than suspenseful.

Here's how *Stranger Things* is described on Wikipedia:

Set in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana, in November 1983, the first season focuses on the investigation into the disappearance of a young boy amid supernatural events occurring around the town, including the appearance of a girl with psychokinetic abilities who helps the missing boy's friends in their search.¹

It continues:

The nearby Hawkins National Laboratory ostensibly performs scientific research for the United States Department of Energy, but secretly does experiments into the paranormal and supernatural, including those that involve human test subjects. Inadvertently, they have created a portal to an alternate dimension, "the Upside Down." The influence of the Upside Down starts to affect the unknowing residents of Hawkins in calamitous ways.²

In *Stranger Things*, the Upside Down exists in ominous parallel to everyday life in Hawkins, Indiana. There are vivid quick clips in which we see the earth as a thin layer, with the known world on the top side and an alien landscape underneath. Interestingly, while the creatures of the Upside Down threaten humanity, the portal-punching scientists are the true bad guys.

Like the missing boy, I too got sucked into the Upside Down—or at least into watching the rest of *Stranger Things*. Part of the allure was seeing the nineteen-eighties recreated for the twenty-teens. There is big hair and so much more, including things I had completely forgotten about. Chocolate pudding in a can? *Oh, yeah, now I remember.* Here's one standout: the actor Winona Ryder plays the frantic mom of that missing boy, and her primary means of communication is a landline connected to a yellow wall-mounted telephone with a rotary dial. That phone epitomizes why the series had to be set in the 1980s, or at least before the advent of cell phones: the plot necessitates that its adventuring middle-schoolers be free-range. They take off on their bikes in the morning, leaving their parents with only a vague suggestion of their intended location and the barest means to retrieve them.

In the 1970s, I was a free-range kid myself. I don't mean to over-idealize those days, but *Stranger Things* left me feeling nostalgic about a time when being “disconnected” wasn't a rare treat. It didn't require careful planning and execution, but rather was the usual state of being. Besides, what if there *is* an “alternate dimension”? What if there *are* portals that connect us to that world? I don't mean a place filled with menacing monsters, but something more like a fountainhead of God's love and grace. Experiencing *that* alternate dimension perhaps *requires* us to be less attached by our tethers to this world. Earlier I said this about *Stranger Things*: while the creatures of the Upside Down threaten humanity, the portal-punching scientists are the true bad guys—a reminder, perhaps, that technology isn't always our friend. Thank God there were no cell phones in first-century Palestine.

But let me back up. The presence of an alternate dimension, one occupied by beings who visit the human dimension, would have been accepted fact in Jesus' time. Case in point: the nativity stories in the gospels. Remember, only Matthew and Luke offer information about Jesus' birth, and their two accounts have irreconcilable differences. Still, they align in at least one very important way: the human participants in the drama are guided by paranormal phenomena. Luke features Mary and shepherds, while Matthew features Joseph and magi, but all are regular people who witness and respond to angel, dream, or star. Back in the day, angel, dream, and star would have carried authority.

Yes, I understand: that was then, and this is now. And no: we can't read the stories literally. Even so, there are things we can learn. We might not turn to angel, dream, or star, but we make decisions all the time. We are at our best when we follow our intuition, which is as mysterious as angel, dream, or star. In fact, we make a lot of decisions without even noticing that we're making them. That lack of noticing has gotten us into big trouble—for a case in point, consider the growing awareness of how our mindless consumption affects the environment. We might do better with an angel—or at least with a moment's hesitation.

A relationship with God, like any relationship, requires attention, and we are a distracted people. In this season of preparation for the first coming of our messiah, perhaps it's worth wondering whether we still have the capacity to see the signs of our messiah's final coming. Know that I'm not pointing a finger at you; I am convicting myself. And if I'm feeling nostalgic about less connected days, then maybe I should be listening to that. To offer another recent example, if seeing the light of the full moon reflecting off snow makes me feel pensive, then maybe I should stop right there. It might not even be too far-fetched to suggest that another dimension has sent me a supernatural message, luring me to a coRRrection that will yield a deeper coNNection to that fountain of love and grace.

Advent, the season of sitting and listening, the season of preparation, is nearly over. Mother Mary's peace is about to be broken by the wails of a newborn baby. Advent is about attention, and attention requires mindfulness. Call it meditation or prayer, if you wish; either way, it's about pausing in the moment with one's whole awareness: to dreams and visions, to full moon on snow, to sun glinting on icy branches, to the embodied humanity that lurches all around us. The individual and collective benefits are clear, even if the discipline of practice is elusive.

This fall at St. Thomas’s Day School, we introduced mindfulness practice into daily chapel. The recommendation to do so actually came from the diversity consultant that Head of School Gina Panza hired last year. I should have thought of it myself. Mindfulness practice in chapel is a bit challenging, because all the children—kindergarten through grade 6—are in chapel together, and experts recommend different methods for different ages. When we started out, Chaplain Will used the chapel homily time to discuss the benefits of mindfulness—which is to say, he unpacked things like reduced stress and increased well-being. After some trial and error, we have settled on an approach that the children seem to be responding to. We ask them to sit as quietly as possible and if they have a thought to notice it and let it go. The sitting time is only about 20 seconds—but that’s an eternity for a kindergartner. We developed a script that we use every day, so that they are hearing the same instructions.

To wrap up our own homily time, rather than hear more talk about mindfulness, let’s try practicing it, the way we do in Day School chapel, just holding it a little longer. Remember, the goal is to sit as quietly as possible, and if you have a thought to notice it and let it go.

Okay, let’s begin. I invite you to sit up straight. Put your feet on the floor if you can reach it. Find a comfortable position for your hands. Close your eyes if you wish. Try to relax your body and be still. Take a deep breath in and out. We will begin and end with the ringing of the singing bowl.

Notes

¹ “*Stranger Things*,” Wikipedia, available online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stranger_Things (accessed December 22, 2019)

² Ibid.