

November 29, 2020  
The First Sunday of Advent—Year B  
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Isaiah 64:1-9  
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9  
Mark 13:24-37

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It's the first day of the liturgical year, the New Year's Day of the Church. The calendar year 2020 has by many measures has been a terrible one, and I'm already seeing media posts from people who are looking forward to bidding it a hearty, "Good riddance!" We Episcopalians are fortunate to be able to say it sooner than most.

We turn over the calendar today, but we begin this new year much the same as we ended the last one: with a little gospel apocalypse. Last week we got it from Matthew and this week we get it from Mark. That double dose of apocalypse comes along only once every three years. Occasionally it's well timed. The first time I ever preached at this triennial liturgical moment was in 2008—which is to day, during the financial crisis known as the Great Recession. Some mark the apex of that crisis as being the previous September 15, the day Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy.

Some of us who lived through that era came out of it okay, through the passage of time. But in fact many others fared more permanently *less well*, despite what the Dow Jones Industrial Average might say. A spate of articles written at the ten-year-anniversary outlined the long-term effects still being felt. In December 2017, a writer for *The Atlantic* put it this way: "10 years after the economy tipped into the deepest contraction of the post–World War II era, the Great Recession's scars remain, as seen in academic studies and government figures, as well as the testimony of regional business experts and the families that lived through it. The country has rebounded in many ways, but is also more unequal, less vibrant, less productive, poorer, and sicker than it would have been had the crisis been less severe."<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of sicker, twelve years later we've gone from global financial crisis to global health crisis. So many people have died. So many more are sick. Even more are hungry. On Wednesday, hunger was the subject of a *Washington Post* story. Watch the video attached to that story while I read from it...

*Open the online version of the story and a video header plays automatically.*

It was 5 a.m., not a hint of sun in the Houston sky, as Randy Young and his mom pulled into the line for a free Thanksgiving meal. They were three hours early. Hundreds of cars and trucks already idled in front of them outside NRG Stadium. This was where Young worked before the pandemic. He was a stadium cook. Now, after losing his job and struggling to get by, he and his 80-year-old mother hoped to get enough food for a holiday meal.

"It's a lot of people out here," said Young, 58. "I was just telling my mom, 'You look at people pulling up in Mercedes and stuff, come on.' If a person driving a Mercedes is in need of food, you know it's bad."

More Americans are going hungry now than at any point during the deadly coronavirus pandemic, according to a Post analysis of new federal data .... Experts say it is likely that there's more hunger in the United States today than at any point since 1998, when the Census Bureau began collecting comparable data about households' ability to get enough food.

One in 8 Americans reported they sometimes or often didn't have enough food to eat in the past week, hitting nearly 26 million American adults, an increase several times greater than the most comparable pre-pandemic figure, according to Census Bureau survey data collected in late October and early November. That number climbed to more than 1 in 6 adults in households with children.<sup>2</sup>

No matter what the Dow Jones Industrial Average might say, the effects of this crisis, too, will be with us for a very long time.

Advent is feeling particularly welcome this year. During Advent we await both the first and the second coming of our messiah. It is the season of pregnant possibility. We slow down and prepare; we watch and wait. We even do our best to embrace the darkness, knowing that the light will come.

For me, the short winter days of December and January can be difficult. But I'm fortunate that darkness itself has never carried a threat. Perhaps that's why I experience darkness as balm. I certainly don't live in the closet now, but I was one of those kids who spent quite a bit of time in mine when I was little. Darkness still makes me feel calm and safe. It helps me return to myself. It helps me return to God.

I've been missing the wilderness, and it may very well be that the thing I miss most isn't the daytime wilderness, but the nighttime wilderness. In August of 2019 Jakki and I went up to Bar Harbor, where she officiated at a wedding and we took a few days of vacation. In August, Acadia National Park is super crowded in during the day, but it's still practically empty at night. Two nights I dragged us back into the park after dark so that we could just sit by ourselves surrounded by that velvet blackness. Here's a short video I took one of those night at Otter Point, which is on the mail loop in the park. You can hear the surf on the rocks and a buoy clanging.<sup>3</sup>

*Play video from Otter Point.*

That's a special place for me, but there are a lot of ways to learn from the darkness. Here's a very different nighttime image. This is the Empire State Building in New York City at night.

*Show image of the Empire State Building at night.*



I've been reading this book, *Vesper Flights*, by an author named Helen Macdonald. If you're a bird watcher you've probably heard of her and probably this book as well. Helen Macdonald is a British essayist and naturalist. Her previous book was the best-selling 2014 memoir *H is for Hawk*. One of the essays in this book is called "High-Rise." I first read it a couple of weeks ago, and it really haunted my mind, it has really stuck with me, and I've thought a lot about it. I'm going to read some excerpts from it. Keep in mind that, in the essay, it's early May, and Macdonald takes her binoculars to the observation deck of the Empire State Building—to watch birds—at night. This is what she writes:

Skyscrapers are at their most perfect at night, full-fledged dreams of modernity that erase nature and replace it with a new landscape wrought of artifice, a cartography of steel and glass and light. But people live in them for the same reason that they travel to wild places: to escape the city. The highest buildings raise you above the mess and chaos of life at street level; they also raise you into something else. Thy sky may seem like an empty place, just as we once thought the deep ocean to be a lifeless void. But like the ocean, this is a vast habitat full of life – bats and birds, flying insects, spiders, windblown seeds, microbes, drifting spores. The more I stare at the city across miles of dusty, uplit air, the more I begin to think of these super-tall buildings as machines that work like deep-sea submersibles, transporting us to inaccessible realms we cannot otherwise explore. Inside them, the air is calm and clean and temperate. Outside is a tumultuous world teeming with unexpected biological abundance, and we are standing in its midst.

Above us, LED bulbs around the base of the spire cast a soft halo of pale light up into the darkness....<sup>4</sup>

Skipping ahead:

The tallest buildings, like the Empire State, One World Trade Center and other new super-towers, project into airspace that birds have used for millennia. The city lies on the Atlantic Flyway, the route used by hundreds of millions of birds to fly north every spring to their breeding grounds and back again in the fall. Most small songbirds tend to travel between three and four thousand feet from the ground, but they vary their altitude depending on the weather. Large birds fly higher, and some, like shorebirds, may well pass over the city at ten to twelve thousand feet. Up here we'll be able to see only a fraction of what is moving past us: even the tallest buildings dip into only the shallows of the sky.

Though you can see migrating raptors soaring at altitudes well over eight hundred feet above the city during the day, most species of diurnal birds migrate after nightfall. It's safer. Temperatures are cooler, and there are fewer predators around.<sup>5</sup>

Skipping ahead again:

I feel less like a naturalist here and more like an amateur astronomer waiting for a meteor shower, squinting expectantly into the darkness. I try a new tactic: focusing my binoculars on infinity and pointing them straight upwards. Through the lenses, birds invisible to the naked eye swim into view, and there are birds above them, and birds higher still. It strikes me that we are seeing a lot of birds. An awful lot of birds.

For every larger bird I see, thirty or more songbirds pass over. They are very small. Watching their passage is almost too moving to bear. They resemble stars, embers, slow tracer fire. Even through binoculars those at higher altitudes are tiny ghostly points of light. I know that they have loose-clenched toes tucked to their chests, bright eyes, thin bones and a will to fly north that pulls them onward night after night. Most of them spent yesterday in central or southern New Jersey before ascending into darkness. Larger birds keep flying until dawn. The warblers tend to come earlier to earth, dropping like stones into patches of habitat further north to rest and feed over the following day. Some, like yellow-rumped warblers, begin their long journeys in the south-eastern states. Other, like rose-breasted grosbeaks, have made their way up from Central America.<sup>6</sup>

She goes on, and the essay begins to take a darker turn:

The spire is lit with pulsing rivulets of climbing colour like a candle tonight to mark the buildings' eighty-fifth anniversary. And these birds have been attracted to it, pulled off course, their exquisite navigational machinery overwhelmed by light, leaving them confused and in considerable danger. After being mesmerized in this way, some birds drag themselves free and continue their journey. Others don't.

New York is among the brightest cities in the world after Las Vegas, only one node in a flood of artificial illumination that runs from Boston down to Washington. We cherish our cities for their appearance at night, but it takes a terrible toll on migrating songbirds: you can find them dead or exhausted at the foot of high-rise buildings all over America. Disoriented by light and reflections on glass, they crash into obstacles, fly into windows, spiral down to the ground. More than a hundred thousand die each year in New York City alone.<sup>7</sup>

Finally:

Every year the 'Tribute in Light' shines twin blue beams into the Manhattan night as a memorial to the lives lost on September 11. They rise four miles into the air and are visible sixty miles from the city. On peak migration nights songbirds spiral down towards them, calling, pulled from the sky, so many circling in the light they look like glittering, whirling specks of paper caught in the wind.... [Last year an Audubon Society team] got the lights shut off intermittently to prevent casualties. They switched off the 'Tribute' eight times that night for about twenty minutes at a time, releasing the trapped birds to return to their journey.<sup>8</sup>

This essay gave me a glimpse into a wonder of nature of which I had been completely oblivious. I also heard at least two lessons that might be valuable to us more broadly this Advent. First, glorious surprises may be found in the light of unfamiliar places. Second, a period of full darkness may provide release from false light and facilitate following true light.

This Thanksgiving, my social media feed included a lot more articles about the problematic aspects of the ridiculously flawed first-Thanksgiving tall tale that is embedded in American culture.

In today's reading from Mark, Jesus says about the return of the Son of Man, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." That generation did pass away. Maybe Jesus or maybe Mark got it wrong. Or maybe they both got it very right. Maybe the Son of Man is always coming. Maybe every generation gets to see his Advent before that generation passes away, and the key is simply to notice. Maybe noticing requires a retuning of the way we watch. And maybe, this Advent, that's what's happening,--even if we're not even fully aware of it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Annie Lowrey, "The Great Recession Is Still With Us," *The Atlantic*, December 1, 2017, available online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/12/great-recession-still-with-us/547268/> (accessed November 28, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Todd C. Frankel, Brittney Martin, Andrew Van Dam, and Alyssa Flowers, with drone footage by Mark Felix, "A Growing Number of Americans are Going Hungry," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2020, available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/business/hunger-coronavirus-economy/> (accessed November 28, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Personal video recorded by Keri Aubert, Acadia National Park, August 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Macdonald, *Vesper Flights* (New York: Grove Press, 2020), 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.