

“Those Who Dream: Stay Awake”  
Mark 13:24-37

One of the basic instincts for survival for us as humans is to try to control our circumstances. This is especially true when life becomes challenging. Fear drives us to want to predict or control the future and its outcomes. In the process of doing that, we stop or at least struggle with living in the present moment. The invitation for us this season of Advent is to stay awake and to inhabit the present moment with grace and openness despite the drive of our fears to try to control the circumstances of our lives. We often confuse staying awake with staying on guard. One is about paying attention to signs of hope and love and the other is about living in fear. Here is a story about the power of staying awake in the midst of fear. It is the story of “The Survivor Tree.” After the horrific attack on the World Trade Center towers in 2001 in New York City, someone noticed a tree. After the buildings were reduced to a heap of smoldering rubble, it seemed like nothing would survive. But someone who was doing some cleanup work around the area of disaster noticed a tree. The power of staying awake was behind an incredible story of hope. Here is a video of the story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xcrt1MNSgFw>.

The tree seemed lifeless, and it had been a month since the attack took place. With snapped roots and blackened trunk, the tree could have been left to die if it were not for someone paying attention. The tree was sent to a nursery in the Bronx and was nursed back to health. Then it was replanted at the 9/11 Memorial in 2010. The tree survived other disasters, and still stands today as a symbol of hope and resilience. In fact, in 2013, the 9/11 Memorial and Museum began the Survivor Tree Seedling program. Here is a list of the beneficiaries of this program spreading seeds of hope and resilience in places of deep brokenness:

### 2021

- The World Health Organization (WHO), for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Norway communities of Oslo and Utøya: 77 total people killed by a gunman on July 22, 2011
- Santa Fe High School. On May 18, 2018, a 17-year-old high school student in Santa Fe, Texas, shot and killed eight students and two teachers and wounded 13 others

### 2020

- The Bahamas, devastated by Hurricane Dorian, which killed 70 people.
- Christchurch, New Zealand, the site of a mass shooting, which killed 51 people.
- Seedlings were also donated to five hospitals throughout New York City’s five boroughs in honor of the healthcare workers responding to the health crisis.

### 2019

- Las Vegas, Nevada, where a gunman killed 58 people and injured 400 more at the Route 91 Harvest Festival in October 2017.

- Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where 11 people were shot and killed and six were injured at the Tree of Life Synagogue.
- The country of Greece, where 102 died and 172 were injured in a series of wildfires in 2018. The municipality of Marathon will accept the seedling on behalf of the country.

## 2018

- Parkland, Florida, where a gunman killed 17 people in February 2018, including students and staff members, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.
- London, England, in memory of those who lost their lives, and on behalf of the bereaved, the survivors, and all those affected by the tragic Grenfell Tower fire.
- Puerto Rico, after the catastrophic Hurricane Maria, which left an estimated 2,975 people dead in its wake.

## 2017

- Manchester, England, in memory of the 22 people, including young adults and children, who were killed by a terrorist bombing at an Ariana Grande concert on May 22, 2017.
- Charleston, South Carolina, in memory of the nine people killed in a shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.
- The country of Haiti, which was devastated by Hurricane Matthew in October 2016.

## 2016

- San Bernardino, California, in memory of the 14 people killed and 22 injured on December 2, 2015.
- Orlando, Florida, in memory of the 49 people killed and 58 injured at Pulse Nightclub on June 12, 2016. The seedling has been planted at the Harry P. Leu Gardens in Orlando.
- The country of France, in memory of the 139 people killed and 368 people injured in Paris on November 13, 2015, and the 86 people killed and 434 injured in the Bastille Day attacks in Nice on July 14, 2016. The seedling has been planted in Paris.

## 2015

- Newtown, Connecticut, in memory of the 20 schoolchildren and six adults who were killed on December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School.
- Joplin, Missouri, in memory of the more than 150 people killed and more than 1,000 injured by a tornado in Joplin on May 22, 2011.
- Madrid, in memory of the 2004 coordinated terror bombings against the Cercanías commuter train system of Madrid that killed 190 people and wounded 1,800.

## 2014

- Oso, Washington, in memory of the 43 people killed in a mudslide that struck the small town on March 22, 2014, and in recognition of the town's resiliency.
- Gulfport, Mississippi, to remember those who died in the region devastated by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

- Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas, in honor of the 16 victims and survivors of the shootings on November 5, 2009, and April 2, 2014, and in acknowledgment of the continued sacrifice of the men and women who serve and their families.

### 2013

- Far Rockaway in Queens, New York, which was torn and battered in 2012 by Superstorm Sandy.
- Prescott, Arizona, in honor of the 19 firefighting members of the Granite Mountain Hotshots who died on June 30, 2013. The fires in Arizona resulted in the highest number of American firefighters killed in a single incident since 9/11.
- Boston, Massachusetts, in honor of the three people killed in the bombing at its marathon on April 15, 2013.

In our Bible story for this week, we hear about another tree that is also a sign of hope and of staying awake. This one is a fig tree. Let's listen to the verse about it from Mark 13:28 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near."

There are 23 mentions of fig trees in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) usually signifying wealth and prosperity. There are 17 mentions of fig trees in the Christian scriptures (New Testament). Fig trees are very common in that part of the world and so it was easy to use them as object lessons. Much like we think of the falling leaves of oak or maple trees around here and think of the fall season, Jesus was using the fig tree to remind people to think of signs of hope in the midst of fear and destruction.

The setting for this story is a time of looming national disaster. The destruction of the temple was imminent as Rome was seeking to squelch any Jewish rebellion in Palestine. The temple was the spiritual center of the identity of the Jewish people at that time. The threat of its destruction would have been a national and spiritual disaster for the disciples.

The signs in the larger passage from Mark 13 are often scary but the sign of the fig tree can help us see them as metaphors for human suffering, violence and disasters which often leave us fearful and wanting to control the future. In fact, this was why the disciples were asking Jesus to give them a specific time for the destruction of the temple. They wanted to know so that they could have a sense of control. Jesus does not answer them with a specific time which would have only increased their fears and anxieties. What Jesus gives them is a reminder to pay attention to hope and to new life springing forth in the midst of pain and destruction.

Sometimes the signs that are given in this passage have been misunderstood as literal predictions of the end of times. When Jesus talks about all these events that will happen before "this generation" passes away, some people have taken this to mean a certain generation in the future. While in fact, the obvious meaning of "this generation" is the generation contemporary with Jesus. The end was coming for

Jesus. He was about to be arrested and executed by the authorities. A lot of what is predicted in this text in fact happened with the events of the passion of Jesus. These apocalyptic predictions give the passion narrative its world altering significance. The events of the passion were seen as fulfillment of the apocalyptic vision of Jesus. The darkening of the sun happened at the time of the crucifixion. The disciples are invited to stay awake and be watchful for signs of new life. That is what tender branches putting forth leaves reveal. Spring is the season when the world awakes from the dead of winter.

Much like the Survivor Tree in NYC, the fig tree in this text is about new hope and new life always springing forth, even in the worst of circumstances. Our work is to watch for these signs of hope. Staying awake instead of staying on guard helps us to dream new dreams for our world, even during its nightmares.

Attuning ourselves to signs of new life is the work of the Spirit which produces new life in and through us. What helps you to stay awake instead of staying on guard?

In her new book, *Practically Divine*, Becca Stevens tells of a time when she felt so much helplessness as she watched the women and children fleeing Syria. She writes “The scene I couldn’t get out of my head was of an overcrowded boat with mothers clinging to their children and everyone crying. Most of the women’s husbands already had fled and immigrated to Germany or Sweden. The boats the women boarded were too small and weak for the rough seas...I tried to imagine what it might feel like to flee a war and board an unsafe boat on rough seas. There would be exhaustion, for sure, hunger as well...it was difficult to know what I could do to help...Then, one day, I was walking in the Tennessee woods, where so many ideas are born for me. As I thought about the women in the camps, an idea rose as quietly and quickly as a hawk on a thermal draft: *Let’s weave the life vest they were wearing on those horrible boats into welcome mats*. The most practical and beautiful way to help seemed to be to take the symbols of the trauma and fear of their escape and turn them into mats that would be a new symbol of love and welcome for refugees.”

Out of staying awake to hope, Becca and others with her were able to bring forth new life out of death and the Love Welcomes ministry. Here is a short video about their work: <https://vimeo.com/215183596>.

Stay awake and pay attention to where God’s dream is being born anew! Amen.