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First Sunday of Advent 2018  
As we enter into Advent we will reflect on how simplicity may be a way of preparing the heart for the radical oncoming of story that is Christmas, by paying attention to the demands of justice, focus and resolution in the readings of Advent.

It is always striking that the texts for Advent are as stark as they are. The lectionary brings us to some of the more troubled sections of Luke's gospel for this first week of the season: words about signs in the sun, moon and stars; words about foreboding and shaking and confusion; words about power and glory. The texts propose visions of dystopia.

Before reflecting on the theological insight of the dramatic language, it's worthwhile imagining oneself into the mind of the writer of Luke's gospel. At this stage, it was supposed that Jesus of Nazareth might come back at any point. As the early gospel tradition developed some people began to imagine apocalyptic endings *any day now* and so, you find New Testament texts that are disparaging about, say, marriage, because it's seen as a distraction from the cataclysmic events believed to be just around the corner.

One can read that as a limited understanding of time and religion, but one can also read this that there are always people alive for whom events signal to them the end of the world. It may be that the last number of years for many individuals have signaled for them serious political times, with increasing

division and rhetoric and public acceptance of boorish performances of masculinities. However, there are entire populations of people who have been living with the consequences of political misrepresentation, manipulation and despotism. The world is always ending — for some populations. And often, those populations are conscious that their drama is ignorable by many.

And so the ancient writer is bringing us into something that is always happening all around us. Awfulneses are always happening, and the opening text of Advent calls the attention of the entire church to turn towards those places where signs are ominous, worlds are ending, storms and fainting and terriblenesses are all around.

What is extraordinary in this is that the religious imagination is called to a deep integrity: "be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation". The faithful are called to not be distracted by fripperies, but also not to be distracted by devastation. To hold deeply to the principle and foundations that will guide you and hold you steady. The four-week drama of Advent builds this sense of foreboding about heavy times, and culminates it all in the risk of God to become incarnate in the body of a small child.



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From Fredrick Buechner, I think we are waiting. That is what is at

the heart of it. Even when we don't know that we are waiting, I think we are waiting. Even when we can't find words for what we are waiting for, I think we are waiting. An ancient Advent prayer supplies us with the words. "Give us grace," it says, "that we may cast off the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light." We who live much of the time in the darkness are waiting not just at Advent, but at all times for the advent of light, of that ultimate light that is redemptive and terrifying at the same time. It is redemptive because it puts an end to the darkness, and that is also why it is terrifying, because for so long, for all our lives, the darkness has been home, and because to leave home is always cause for terror.

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So to wait for Christ to come in his fullness is not just a passive thing, a pious, prayerful, churchly thing. On the contrary, to wait for Christ to come in his fullness is above all else to act in Christ's stead as fully as we know how. To wait for Christ is as best we can to be Christ to those who need us to be Christ to them most and to bring them the most we have of Christ's healing and hope because unless we bring it, it may never be brought at all.

-Fredrick Buechner

STORY: There was a farmer who had a lot of fields, and he kept all the birds and creatures away from his crops with traps and fences. He was very successful.

But he was also very lonely. So, one day, he stood in the middle of his fields to welcome the animals. He stayed there from dawn until dusk, with his arms outstretched, calling to them. But, not a single animal came. Not a single creature appeared. They were terrified, you see, of the farmer's new Scarecrow.

The Doctor is a movie about surgeon Jack McKee (William Hurt); the story of an aloof, self-centered heart surgeon who treats his patients like numbers on a list. Then he gets sick himself—cancer—and is not prepared for the paradigm shift. And his sickness (and vulnerability) gives him the opportunity to change his life. The story of the farmer is from the movie, and is about that paradigm shift.

I admit it. I like my fields orderly. I like my world tidy. Free from commotion and disruption and creatures. Life feels understandable or manageable that way. And there is an artifice of control.

See (I somehow assure myself), my world is in place.

My script is in place.

This yearning for control (or grasp) has a special import in today's binary world, where we live by the paradigm that the other (you know, anyone we call them) is considered an enemy, and to be feared. So, our approach to each encounter ends up skeptical at best, and adversarial at worst.

Like the farmer, we feel threatened. (By uncertainty.) Although, that's not quite the right word; more like undefended or vulnerable.

**Meaning that if I do expand my world, open my fields, invite "them" (or any other) into this world, I (and my heart) am exposed to touch. To connection. To kindness. To empathy. To wounds. To love. To untidiness. To generosity. To loss. To bounty. To the unknown.** Because these creatures—whatever or whoever they represent—may not handle me or my world with care. My confession is that deep down, maybe I don't really want intimacy. Maybe I just want security.

I saw A Star is Born this week in one of those theaters reclined in a cushy chair. The story of two people (Jackson and Ally) trying to find their way. Jackson, feeling at the mercy of the "creatures". His "scarecrow" stance affecting his relationships and his wellbeing. I feel it at my core when Ally sings, "Tell me something, boy Aren't you tired tryin' to fill that

void?

Or do you need more?  
Ain't it hard keeping it so hardcore?"

The 1988 film *Gorillas in the Mist* tells the story of Dian Fossey, courageous field biologist, as she managed to befriend a tribe of gorillas. Dian had gone to Africa in footsteps of mentor, George Schaller, a renowned primate biologist who had returned from the wilds with more intimate and compelling information about gorilla life than any scientist before. When his colleagues asked how he could learn such remarkable detail about the tribal structure, family life, and habits of gorillas, he attributed it to one simple thing: he never carried a gun.

You see, all previous generations of explorers and scientists entered that territory with one assumption: the gorillas were dangerous. **So, the scientists came with an aggressive spirit, large rifles in hand.**

**The gorillas could sense the danger, and kept distance. What a surprise.**

And yes, I do enter many (okay, most) of my relationships well-armed. (Just in case.) And I wonder why guardedness takes root in my spirit.

I like that Fossey always moved slowly, gently, and above all, respectfully toward these creatures. Sometimes sitting still, hour after hour.

"Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough," George Washington Carver reminded us. It's as if we want them both. You know, I want my field free of creatures (who knows what they will do). And I want the creatures to be my friend (but why are they so suspicious of me?). It's a tug of war between the unknown (the mystery) and the need to be held very tight and told, "You are okay now."

In *The Doctor*, McKee is telling his friend June—fellow cancer patient—about his difficulty connecting with his wife; living a life full of misunderstanding, apprehension and wariness. And how it constricts his heart.

How he no longer wants "an empty field."

He wants company.

"I've kept her out here for years," he says with his hand and arm raised and outstretched. **"And I don't want that anymore. But I don't know how to get my arm down."**

June writes a letter to Jack (delivered after her death), with the story of the scarecrow. **And closes with this invitation: just let down your arms, and we'll all come to you.** What is it we are keeping out?

**Tell me again...**

**Just let your arms down.**

**So. I stand in my field welcoming all.**

**Waiting to see if someone comes.**

In a recent blog Maria Shriver posted, "In the spirit of Fall, I've been thinking about the idea of falling into every part of life. So many of us hold ourselves back from really letting go and falling in. We are scared that if we fall in fully we will get hurt or be disappointed. We are terrified that there will be nothing there to catch us. There is always a chance of that but I've come to believe that standing back is far scarier than falling in. Standing back and being aware of it makes us feel stuck, makes us feel afraid, makes us feel less than. When we let ourselves fall in, we fall into our courage. **We fall into our strength. We fall into our power and our worth. We fall into ourselves and our joy and meaning.**"

Tell me again...

Just let your arms down.

