

# Advent, Your Little Red Pencil

Part 1 of a series: *Living in the Now*

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, November 29, 2009: The First Sunday of Advent.  
Based on Luke 21:25-36.*

The whole point of an automobile is to move and go places. But the first thing you need to know about operating an automobile is how to stop it.

That's a simple spiritual truth, too. Life is filled with moving violations.

Let me tell you an embarrassing violation of my own. Years ago, I was driving my sons to school. They had dawdled and missed their school bus, and the traffic was stop and go. We were all on edge. I turned to quiet one of them, or make a point, and I failed to stop short and rolled into the bumper of the car ahead.

I think you can imagine the level of frustration—pulling over, horn-honking as we partly blocked the traffic, exchanging information, now even later for school, saying things to the boys that I instantly regretted.

And then of course, a friendly officer arrived, and once he determined what had happened, issued me a ticket. Later that day, when I had finally had time, I read that ominous pink slip and saw that under the section Violation, he had checked: "Failure to pay time and attention."

Guilty, as charged.

So, there's a downside to not being able to stop. But more than that, there are benefits to the soul when you stop and take in life. *Don't just do something, stand there*, is a pearl of wisdom.

But why don't we hear it? Why don't you stop when it's the needful thing to do?

Well, as those of you who know me already know, I myself am a typical example of someone who feels responsibility and is driven by work and the ordinary obligations of life. I confess it. And I won't hold myself out as a paragon of enlightened spiritual practice. I have a hard time stopping.

Let's just say we're in this together, and possibly we can help one another stop . . . and live in the now.

In our tradition, we begin the season of Advent each year by getting in touch with the powerful example of Jesus on the subject of the Now. My colleagues and I have committed ourselves to preach a series of sermons these next four Sundays on this connected theme—learning to stop and live in the moment. Again, by tradition, Advent—this little season of preparation before Christmas—puts before us, through the scriptures, powerful examples of Jesus confronting the anxiety of his time and coming down on the side of the now. And of course this is interesting because most of us associate this season with predictions of the Second Coming and other portents.

What we know about the time he lived is that it was that while it was without the technology and global consciousness of ours, it was emotionally and spiritually just as anxious.

"There will be . . . on the earth distress among nations . . . People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."

His advice:

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and . . . the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

[Luke 21:25 ff.]

The set up for this is earlier in the same chapter of Luke:

21:7 They asked him, "Teacher, when will

this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?’ And he said, ‘Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not go after them.

A couple of words about these dramatic texts. There’s no certainty that Jesus commented on world affairs or even said much about the politics of the Roman occupation of his country. But we know the gospel writers had material on these subjects, and that they found that material crucial to their credibility. These books were being published at or around the year 70 C.E., when the Temple at Jerusalem was destroyed—a kind of 9/11 moment for that people.

What we do know is that Jesus was consistently interested in the quality of life. He was trying to show people how to be fully human. To do that, he said, we needed to see that however urgently distracted we are, we need to stop. However emotionally wounded or needy we are, he said, there is something to be seen—and lived—in the moment, the now.

We just need to stop.

I heard a fascinating interview recently with the neuroscientist Adele Diamond, speaking about her work in how the front cortex develops and particularly how this development affects the learning patterns of children.

She spoke of a Minneapolis classroom where the methodology both children and teacher use is to make learning plans. A child may make several each day, for various tasks. Kids being kids they typically lose attention and want to do something else. The teacher’s job is to remind the child gently that she had committed to the plan, and to spend another ten or fifteen minutes on it. Want to write a new one then? Fine. Stop, think, start again. It’s called developing the executive function—the power to stop, the power to know what’s going on now, or, as she says, “The having to do it when your first inclination isn’t to do it.”

Dr. Diamond offers an example in a math context. In their first forays with numbers as opposed to words, a lot of children will do

“mirror writing,” writing, for example, a six reversed.

Turns out that’s pretty normal. But teachers, and especially parents, get quite anxious about this.

Dr. Diamond continues:

“A lot of teachers will pull their hair about this, so they might have the child write 6 a thousand times. It doesn’t help, but they’ll try whatever they can to try to get the child not to do it. And [the teacher in Minneapolis] has a very simple way, and after an afternoon or an evening, the mirror writing is gone. What she says is when you go home tonight and you do your math homework, every time you’re supposed to write a 6, put down your pencil and pick up a red pencil. That’s all she says. That’s the whole instruction. None of this “you’re a bad kid.” No. And the reason it works is because the child has an automaticity to do this mirror writing, and what the child really needs to do is take a moment and think and do what you really know you should do but is not your first inclination. But if you ask a child this young to wait it doesn’t help.

*The interview with Dr. Diamond, conducted by Krista Tippet on NPR’s Program, Speaking of Faith, is worth listening to here: <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/learning-doing-being/> You can also read a transcript there.*

I’ve been asking adults to wait and watch and slow down in Advent for years, and it doesn’t help either.

Brothers and sisters, Advent is that red pencil. Put down what you’re obsessing about and pick it up.

You know you need to do something.

When we’re at work, have you noticed that we fantasize about being on vacation. On vacation, if you’re anything like me you worry about the work piling up while you’re away. We often dwell on intrusive memories or fret about

what may or may not happen in the future. The Buddhists say that we don’t appreciate the living present because our monkey minds, as they call it, vault from thought to thought like monkeys swinging from tree to tree. You just begin to race and if you don’t take time and pay attention you bump the car ahead of you.

Again, Jesus, far from the apostle of doom and predictor of a scary second coming, sought to bring people back to a place of inner quiet and trust.

“Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? . . . Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” [Matthew 6:27-34]

Enough already.

The King James Version has a memorable translation of that last line: Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. *Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.*

In her memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert writes about a friend who, whenever she sees a beautiful place, exclaims in a near panic,

“It’s so beautiful here! I want to come back here someday!” “It takes all my persuasive powers,” writes Gilbert, “to try to convince her that she is already here.”

I’ve benefited a lot from the simple wisdom of a remarkable man, the late Babatunde Olatunji. Born and raised in the Yoruba tribe, as a teenager he picked up a discarded copy of the Reader’s Digest, of all things, and saw the Kiwanis Club’s offer of a scholarship to study in the United States. He went for it, won it, and he came to NYU, studied Public Administration and went into business. For his recreation he played the drums as he had learned to play as a child. And people in his life found his playing wondrous and asked to learn.

This became so much a part of his life that by the end of his life all the way from the Yoruban tribe he ended up at Esalen in Big Sur teaching people like us the joy of beating on a drum and he said this, “Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. And today—today is a gift. That’s why we call it the present.”

You can let the rush and obligations of this slightly crazy season define you. Or you can savor the joys embedded in the time.

So, stop. Pay time and attention. Apply the brakes. Pick up that red pencil. It’s Advent.

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