

Guard Your Hearts – Luke 21:25-37 and 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

A sermon for the First Sunday of Advent (Like New Year's Day but for the Church)

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on November 28, 2021

Every so often scripture comes alive in an unexpected way. Most recently this happened for me on Thanksgiving. We watched a movie after dinner and before pie. King Richard. It's a story about Venus and Serena Williams' father. Richard and their mother, Oracene, coached them to become two of the world's greatest tennis players of all time. This was their story. My scripture radar lit up in the scene when Richard makes the girls watch Cinderella after he felt that they'd crossed the line from celebrating into bragging. He asked them about the movie's lesson. They guessed a few answers, none of which were what he was hoping for. He was about to make them watch it again when their mom caboshed him. Instead, he gave his own short sermon about being humble no matter what comes their way – disrespect, winning, or losing. And that they needed to keep their hearts clean.

When he said told them to keep their hearts clean, my mind translated it through the Luke reading. I thought I'd heard Richard say to the girls, "You got to guard your hearts!" I rewatched that scene a day later, as I was writing my sermon, and discovered that the gospel writer's words weren't in the movie as I'd thought. Which is also like when you think you heard the preacher say something in a sermon, so you mention it to them, and they assure you that it wasn't in there. I chalk those moments up to the Holy Spirit's mischief. Anyway, Richard's admonition to them to keep their hearts clean carried several messages during the film – stay humble, stay off the streets, stay away from drugs. In other words, stay focused and guard your hearts.

Jesus also warned his disciples about their hearts. His words were a little different. Jesus said, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." I like the Advent message in this verse. Advent, the start of the church year, is a time to get ready – only partly for Christmas and Jesus in the manger. Advent is more about trusting God's promise that the kingdom comes fully when Jesus comes again.

This year, the first Sunday of Advent offers a Bible reading that sounds alarming but was a word of comfort to Jesus' disciples with a message of hope. Chaos ruled their time. Rome was on the warpath. Oppression was rampant from the haves over the have nots. Jesus' words in this reading comforted people with the promise of God's kingdom in a world that felt like it was ending. During that chaos, Jesus taught them to guard their hearts against overindulgence. Because overindulgence, dissipation and drunkenness are an easy move when the world is in chaos and people are fainting in fear and foreboding. This year's increased alcohol sales show just how easy it is to numb out of the chaos. Alcohol is only one way, and easy to measure, but we all know that there are other ways to avoid feeling the feelings and engaging with the world. Most of us can name our preferred mode of escape.

Jesus' challenge to the disciples considers another way to live in the chaos while awaiting the kingdom of God. Guard your hearts from being weighed down with the worries of this life. Straightforward but not easy to do. Fortunately, we have some help. For starters, we have a framework called the Church Year, a.k.a. the Liturgical Year. The first Sunday of Advent is a timely reminder that there is a structure in place for guarding our hearts – like New Year's Day, but for the church. Time is structured, first with Advent, then the 12 days of Christmas, then Epiphany and the following Sundays, and the rest that follows, to guard our hearts as we're weekly and sometimes daily reminded who we are and who we belong to.

This Advent, you're encouraged to do that with the daily devotion books on the tables at the doors.¹ You can also download an e-copy on your phone. Starting today there are short verses, readings and a prayer for each day that take us through the twelve days of Christmas. Whether you've done daily devotions many times or have never done daily devotions, there are touch points for faith each day that help us guard our hearts as individuals and connects us to each other as we daily reflect and pray the same devotions. Pick one up on your way out of worship this morning and get started.

¹ Heaven and Nature Sing: Devotions for Advent and Christmas 2021. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2021).
<https://go.augsburgfortress.org/devotions-for-advent-and-christmas>

Christianity has always been about engaging the world with hearts of compassion – and never about disengaging or escaping. Compassion guards our hearts against cynicism and the objectification of other people. We can tell when we’re objectifying folks when we start accepting their suffering as deserved or, at the very least, beyond our control. How many Sunday worship readings in the Church Year focus us on loving God and loving neighbor and that when we love our neighbor then we are also loving God? I don’t actually know the answer to that question but I’m going to go out on a limb and guesstimate that it’s a sizeable percent of Sunday readings during the year.

Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians edges toward this notion of loving God, loving neighbor, and loving neighbor to love God. Verses 12 and 13 of the reading go like this, “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you; And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness...” 1 Thessalonians is considered to be Paul’s first recorded letter and may just be my favorite of his letters. There is an abundance of love between Paul and this church, a love from which he attempts to encourage them through their challenges. The language he uses about “strengthening hearts in holiness” could be problematic if he was telling them that they need to aim higher in their piety. But he isn’t. Paul’s words are a prayer, asking that God strengthen their hearts in the holiness that, of course, belongs first to God – that their hearts be guarded by God in their love for each other and for all people.

Good tips for guarding our hearts in today’s readings. Praying for each other. Loving each other and all people. Good tips for guarding our hearts at this Advent time of the Church Year. Daily Devotions. Sunday worship. And here’s one more. Pick a word to guard your heart during the Church Year. A word to guide your prayer and focus your thinking when chaos ramps up and the temptation to escape rather than act in love becomes strong. The word can be “love” or “hope” or any other word from scripture. You can use the readings from today or the readings from the daily devotions this week. Circle the words in the bulletin that resonate with your faith. Thanksgiving Eve’s readings had some great stuff for Advent words too. That bulletin can still be found at augustanadenver.org/worship.

You can get as involved or keep it as simple as you'd like in choosing your word. If there are too many choices, let me know and I can help narrow the options or even just assign you a word. Write the word on a sticky note or create daily calendar reminders that pop the word on your phone at different times of day, or create something cool with paint, markers, or colored pencils. Be as high or low tech as you'd like. Be as simple or as artsy as you'd like.

The bottom line is that guarding our hearts is ultimately about reminding ourselves and each other that our hearts are already guarded. We need reminders that our hearts are already guarded because the world is a noisy place, and we are forgetful humans. We need reminders to not faint from fear, to not numb ourselves with drunkenness, to not be weighed down with worry. Jesus reminds us to engage each other with compassion and gives us plenty of examples. Our hearts are already guarded by Christ Jesus – the Messiah for whom we wait at Kingdom Come and the One who arrives in, with, and under the bread and wine of holy communion. We wait with hope and anticipation because God remembers us according to his steadfast love. Amen and Thanks be to God!