

**December 2, 2018; First Sunday in Advent**  
**Isaiah 58:9b-14**  
**Luke 21:25-28; 34-36**  
**Advent Gardening Tips**  
**Michael Stanfield**

*“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

*“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not 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.”*

The year was 1930. In the main telegraph office not far from Times Square in New York City, a group of men sat waiting to be interviewed for a job opening as an operator. A terrible depression was on; times were tough and jobs very hard to come by. As the applicants sat waiting, they chatted nervously – all but one that is. He sat quietly with his head lowered in a corner. At times, the chatter grew louder due to some type of background static coming over the loudspeaker in the waiting room.

Then suddenly, to the surprise of everyone, the odd, quiet man jumped up, ran to an office marked “private”, threw open the door, and ducked quickly inside. This startled the remaining applicants and brought them all to silence. In just a few minutes, the door to the office reopened and the employer, along with the odd man emerged. The employer told them that they could all go home because the one who had just come into his office had been hired.

Befuddled and chagrined, one of the remaining men stood and asked the meaning of this. Why, the behavior of this man had been plain rude. How could he be rewarded for such awful behavior? The employer turned to his new hire and asked him to explain.

“While you all were all chatting,” he said, “I sat here praying in silence. I felt anxious, and so I asked God to simply quiet my soul so that I might be able to accept his will and his way for me concerning this job. As I did, the words of Isaiah 58:11 came to me: *And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.*<sup>1</sup>

“This gave me such comfort that I imagined myself *in* a garden preparing it for planting. Jesus was with me. But in my imaginings, for some reason, the garden was a mess. I therefore asked Jesus where to start. I listened intently for his answer. As I did, I heard nothing for a long while and then suddenly it became clear – Jesus was speaking to me not with words, but with the dots and the dashes that were being broadcast over the loudspeaker in the waiting room; and the message was:

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<sup>1</sup> *The King James Version*, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769.

“The one I need must always be on alert. The first one who interprets this and comes directly into my private office will be hired.”<sup>2</sup>

Our world today has become awash with frivolous distractions that, like the idle chat of the applicants in our story, tends to relegate those who would unplug and look inward as extremely odd and therefore any messages they might claim to receive from God as little more than worthless static.

Forty-four years ago, a man by the name of Charles Hummel wrote a little essay for Inter-Varsity Press. The name of it was “The Tyranny of the Urgent.” If any of you have been involved at all with Campus Crusade for Christ or CREW over the last two generations, you have probably either read it or have heard of it. To refresh your memory if you have, or to let you in on a great insight if you haven’t, Hummel tells us that being faithful is not about getting our priorities straight.

“Your *greatest* danger,” he says, “is letting the *urgent* things (in your life) crowd out the important things.” In other words, in today’s world, what comes to *us* as urgent is *rarely* all that important. Unlike self help books written since then, Hummel’s essay doesn’t offer the bullet-points of a program for us to follow. Instead it points to the Gospel accounts of Jesus who never seemed to be in a hurry, even when his good friend Lazarus was dying.

Quoting Mark 1:35, Hummel understood the crux of Jesus’ life and work for God as that of waiting mindfully for His Father’s instructions – instructions from within. The headline for this section reads “Dependence Makes You Free,” and Hummel goes on to propose that, “The worst sin is prayerlessness.”<sup>3</sup> Prayerlessness.

It is *this* sin to which I believe Jesus is referring (albeit indirectly) in the gospel text from Luke; and what both Jesus and Hummel meant by prayer was: not talking to God in order to tell God what *we* want, but disciplined, intentional removal of ourselves from the distractions of this world in order to listen and be alert to what *God* wants.

I think we usually interpret this passage about Christ’s second coming (found in all three of the synoptic gospels) as a call to vigilance. But I heartily disagree. I am convinced that the opposite is true; many of us nowadays are vigilant *all of the time*. And when that is one’s default one *stays* on edge, *poised* for the next ‘crisis’; and one gets so used to this state that one doesn’t even realize one is in it. Our adrenaline is up in expectation of the next urgent phone call, text, or e-mail; we remain on guard against any loss of control. Our bodies and minds remain hyper-alert so that we can pick up the scent of a crisis and get a quick handle on its outcome.

We can’t just *be* where we are. If we are there very long, we get antsy; the problem is that such unrest has a tendency to *create* more crises than solve them.

In *The Unnecessary Pastor*, published in 2000, and thus before 9/11 and thus the ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Marva Dawn and Eugene Peterson commented on what happens when we *don’t* have a crisis immediately in front of us. At the very beginning of the book, Dawn recounts

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<sup>2</sup> Loosely based on a story collected by Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*, Assurance Publishers, 1985, pg. 1588.

<sup>3</sup> Hummel, Charles E., *Tyranny of the Urgent*, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship. Downers Grove, IL 60515, 1967.

how the Pentagon was planning to cut the number of military chaplains several years ago. In order to justify their necessity, the chaplains started to get involved in drug counseling, marital counseling, and just about anything else they could think of so they could keep their jobs. The irony is that during wartime, every unit commander wants a chaplain with his unit. Yet in peacetime, people ask, “Who needs a chaplain?” Realizing the dilemma they were in, one chaplain commented, “What *we* need is a good war.”<sup>4</sup>

And that attitude has become the prevailing one of our culture – so much so that it has been self-fulfilling. Fighting and mass shootings, if not all out war have become the norm.

Over and against this madness, Jesus calls us to a deeper and more hopeful stance – a stance that begins with a place of peaceful rest in Bethlehem. Perhaps it is time to say, “enough is enough;” and what better time than Advent to begin.

It is extremely difficult, I will grant you. But what we don’t need is another season full of the kind of busy-ness that leads to little more than a time of disappointment, melancholy and even depression.

Setting aside a daily devotion time of a few minutes is start. But things have gotten so chaotic that something more may be called for. Developing the kind of mindful alertness that Jesus is talking about – the kind that our telegraph operator, who got the job, had developed – requires more, and less. *It ironically requires doing something with the expectation of producing nothing over longer and longer periods of time.*

It sounds like I am advocating laziness. But believe me, I am not. That is exactly what Martha accused Mary of because Mary sat at the feet of Jesus while Martha was busy trying to host everybody. Do you remember that story (Luke 10:38-42)? And what did Jesus say? “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. But Mary has chosen the best part and it shall not be taken from her.”

This brings me finally to the photo of the odd drawing that you have in your bulletin today. For many years, one week out of the year, I would go off by myself to a house in the mountains. It was a simple place with no TV and no computer. I would take the family dog, books that look as though they have the potential of being meaningful or containing some hidden treasure, and a journal to record my dreams and my ruminations.

I would also take along a few art supplies – pastels and chalks, as well as a large pad and small book to write and draw in. I discovered early on that I had the urge while there to recreate the images that welled up in my dreams, rather than just write them down.

I found this to be odd and even a bit embarrassing. I have never considered myself artistic; I can’t remember drawing or painting anything since I was child and the thought of engaging in this activity felt frivolous and dumb. Yet isn’t that just like God? What we reject as worthless, God seeks to honor. So, I decided for once to take these inner urgings seriously and act upon them. The result is the image you have before you (see image attached).

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<sup>4</sup> Dawn, Marva; Peterson, Eugene; *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call*; Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, pg 3.

I placed it there, not because I thought it a worthy piece of art but as an example of what I believe Jesus is talking about in our text when he tells us to be careful and to be alert. Recreating this inner image required me to slow down and rest a part of my brain that is constantly active and open a part of myself that I usually keep closed – asleep – lethargic.

But I also share this image because the dream that prompted it holds the very message of today's sermon. The dream went like this: I was in a terribly neglected walled garden that was right next to my house – all of which was next to a large body of water. I was working with family and friends trying to prepare this garden for planting. As we worked and we dug, we discovered a rather miraculous water source just below the rock walled surface. I, just like the telegraph operator in our earlier story, connected this image with that in our text from Isaiah:

*The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach.*

*If you call the Sabbath a delight not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you **shall** take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;*

It is interesting, isn't it that Isaiah reminds us that it is Sabbath rest which cultivates the kind of mindfulness that *Jesus* is getting at – in fact he links it to a garden with waters that never fail...

At any rate, in the dream, we worked on the garden all day until it was night. But just after dark, what should appear on the shore but a huge barge with cases of every kind of brand new electronic equipment currently on the market. Those who were working with me on the garden rushed down to claim this electric gold. I tried to dissuade them, believing intuitively that this belonged to drug lords or worse, and that having *anything* to do with it would come to no good end. But I convinced no one.

Then suddenly my attention turned to a waxen like spill on the concrete dock for which someone in my party was responsible. It was in the shape of a giant bee and it really bothered me. Now I was troubled about just *what* to do – go back to tending the garden, concentrate on a better argument for leaving the electric gold alone, or work on cleaning up the mess at hand. I chose, as most of us choose – the urgent mess at hand; I began to clean it up, and the dream ended.

I then spent about three days on and off drawing what you have before you. It became a kind of prayer – a time of listening to the Spirit. And this is what I heard:

The garden represented the state of my soul at the time and I would dare say, often the state of most of our souls – unattended, overgrown and in poor shape – filled with garbage and refuse. It is good that I, we, recognized the need to take better care of it. For that care is connected to finding the wellspring of the spirit – the water source in the dream. But there are two things that tend to stand in the way of good soul gardening:

1. First is the shiny, electronic, man-made gadgetry that is the size of a barge load; it marks the dominance of American Culture; it is our collective pride and joy, and holds out the promise of our salvation. Yet, I, *we* have an inkling that this is not the case, although *we*, do a poor job of convincing others or perhaps even ourselves of this fact. Hence, addictive dependence on this gadgetry over God for securing our futures is now in danger of leading us away from our soul gardens and away, therefore from the wellspring of life.

The second set of things that stand in the way of taking care of our soul gardens is the bee spill. It represents the

2. more urgent messes, that come to us, demanding our present attention when there may be far more important things to which we know we could be giving our time. But it is right in front of us, so here we go...

And so it is that both our morning texts and these inner stirrings of mine left me with a question – the same question that I now leave with you – and it is this, “What if the second coming of Christ that we as (Christians) focus upon during Advent is linked as much to our inner reality, our soul gardens, as to our outer reality?” In other words, “What if the second coming is as much an interior dawning upon the soul – no less real and no less objective as some urgent outer event?” Yes, the larger issues represented by the Barge and the smaller issues, represented by the spill are important – but perhaps not the most important – especially if the wellspring of the Spirit is to be found in the soul garden. In that case, then maybe it just might be a good idea to take some time to look inward.

You know the last place people ever think to look for Jesus is in here. But if you think about it, where else would he be? The Apostle Paul said it himself in his letter to the Colossians (1:26-27):

*The Mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages... has now been revealed to his saints. To them, God chose to make known how great... are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is, Christ in you, the (very) hope of glory.*

Therefore, I repeat the words of Jesus, perhaps more relevant in our time than ever, “Be alert” and “Be careful”. Be careful – to find a way to tend *your* soul garden even as you support others in tending theirs.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, forgive us for neglecting the one place we can really prepare for you to be born anew – in the garden stable of very own souls. Give us the courage to listen rather than talk and then to do our best to put what we hear into practice.

And now bless these gifts that they may help open the way for your next coming. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.

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Except where otherwise noted, all biblical texts are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989.

