

**United Church of Fayetteville
310 E. Genesee Street
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**Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even
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For reflection:

Look and you will find it—that which is unsought will go undetected -- Sophocles

LEAVES, LIGHTS AND LOOKIE LOUS (Luke 21:25-31)

Most of you have been to my house by now, and know that as with all homes, it's a never-ending work in progress. The outside is more of a work in progress (with lots less progress) than the inside. Somehow, the lot managed to be simultaneously under-landscaped and overgrown. After watching the yard through all its seasons, (winter and winter's coming), I determined the best course was pruning. As any of you know who have been invited over with your chainsaws, (and wait until you get the invitation for next spring's chain saw party :-), I am an absolutely unsentimental pruner. I am not, however, an indiscriminate one. I choose the right season, after a plant has flowered. I wait until leaves fall so that I can see the actual growth pattern of a tree. If a plant is a stranger to me (as many are now that I have moved to a place where winter lasts from October to May), I may wait an entire year to determine its growth habit, preferred habitat and its long-term desirability for my evolving landscape plan.

A few weeks ago, I was considering whether or not a weeping pussy willow growing in front of the house needed to be shaped or redirected, when I noticed that it had already set its buds for next spring. It needed to be left alone. If I hadn't been looking for the signs of life, not only would I have missed the promise of spring, I would have literally cut off that promise.

Many of us are gardeners and are used to observing the trees and plants, deciding, based on what we see, where there is life to come and where the time is past. Even those of us who are not, yet find ourselves living in CNY, which still moves to the rhythms of agricultural life, also read the signs of the earth and sky, the changing light, smell snow in the air or spring in the soil, much as Jesus' first listeners would have.

There are other signs of change, other types of life to watch for, of course. When the weather changes and being indoors is more appealing, especially with the encroaching holidays, we all tend to look inside rather than at the earth for signs of things to come. We attend to sales notices, exam schedules and flight plans: we purchase advance tickets to *The Nutcracker Suite*, mark our calendars for Brass and Bells concert, catch the scent of vanilla from the kitchen or see the first candles appear in windows, and so look toward the coming of the Christ child --- which may or may not be the kind of watching Jesus is talking about.

Len Sweet tells the story of friends who each Advent get out the crèche scene and place it carefully on the table. The year their son was three, he was fascinated with the baby Jesus lying in the manger – so fascinated, in fact, that he couldn't leave him there. When no one was looking, the baby Jesus would be spirited away and tucked into a planter, hidden under a sofa cushion, or find his way into a cereal bowl. It went on and on. They tried to persuade their son that the baby Jesus needed to stay in the manger, but he remained unconvinced. So Jesus would be tucked into a mitten or found between a teddy bear's paws. If the toddler felt his parents were taking too long to find Jesus, he would

suddenly appear lying in the middle of the living room floor.

The story reminds us that it's not the leaves, it's not the lights that are the point. Rather its how we interpret the signs and what they point to that are the point after all. Even the most faithful among us can lose our focus and miss the possibilities of a season of preparation. We are not just reminding ourselves that a great festival of the church and culture, Christmas Day, is coming. We are not simply waiting to see Jesus in the manger. We are opening our eyes and spirits to the signs and wonders around us, discovering Jesus and his transforming work where ever he might be found.

Jesus calls us to be faith's "lookie lous" -- an old-fashioned phrase that referred to people who slow their cars to see what was happening on the other side of the road, or walk or drive after dark, studying other people's decorating schemes, or are the neighbors who know more about what's happening at our house than we do.

We're not, however, called to be busy bodies or to exercise an idle curiosity, but rather an intentional one. Advent invites us to look for Jesus not just when God drops him into a manger or the middle of the living room floor, but in all the places he might be found, in all the places where there is healing, where expectations are being turned upside down, where the poor are cared for and where justice is done.

Each one of us will see different things: Recovery of health when it wasn't entirely expected. The survival of love after betrayal. Reconciliation in a relationship after wounding. Friends who are there on difficult days. The light that dawns when body, mind or spirit acquires a new skill. New hope for a less lonely life. The birth of a grandchild. A job after unemployment.

There are signs of life to be found not only in our personal lives but in our communal and national lives: Understanding that grows between people of different faiths. Concerns for people who still have not realized the dream of freedom. Prayers for strangers. New shape for historic vision. Re-energized commitment to life lived in community. Groups coming together from different places for shared purposes. People learning how to build neighborhoods and schools of shared values. Neighbors served with evolving forms of mission. The possibility of justice in health care. Work for reconciliation among nations. Signs of change. Portents of things to come.

To be faith's "lookie lous" is not merely a spiritual discipline or an Advent homework assignment. It's something our souls and our world desperately need. In a world at war, where disease runs rampant, where power is still misused, where people go to bed hungry and afraid, where the economy stumbles and number of homeless grows – in other words, in a world where anxiety is a way of life and hope dims – faithful attention and curiosity is critical if hope is to abound.

We need (and the world needs us) to lead a curiosity crawl, observing our world with patience and passion for the possible – prodding and poking, lifting the edges of blankets of assumption, opening closets of fear, shining light into the unknown -- looking for the God who dared to become human; pointing out the possible in vulnerable human flesh, attentive to unexpected signs of life that changed the world 2000 years ago and can change it again today. When we see these things taking place, and tell one another and the world around us what we know and believe –that what is coming is not to be feared – but is the fulfillment of God's purposes for wholeness and health and peace – that the reign of heaven is drawing near – we shall find hopes lifted, resolve strengthened and joy deepened.

Such is the light and life coming into the world. This Advent let us be bearers of hope and the reminders of the life in that promise, partners with God in bringing the reign of heaven to earth.

