

**Beyond What's Seen**  
**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson**  
**The First Sunday of Advent | November 28, 2021**

---

A piece of wood could be the arm of a rocking chair supporting a grandmother cuddling a precious grandchild. Another piece of wood could be the giant beam of a ship holding the force of the ocean at bay. A bit of metal could be shaped into a delicate fashionable curve of a beautiful necklace. Conversely, a chunk of metal could be thick and strong enough to rocket out of the earth's gravity to orbit in space. Whether wood or metal, these examples appear solid to the eye and of one piece.

Yet for years, molecular scientists have known that "what you see is not what you get." At the smallest level, neither wood nor metal are technically "solid". In fact, all matter isn't actually solid. Scientists tell us matter is actually pockets of energy, quama, both waves and particles - a mind-boggling concept even for quantum physicists. At this point in our understanding, we can't be totally sure how objects are constituted and relate to each other.

"What you see is what you get" isn't always true. Or said another way: life is literally a mystery. And that reality, if pondered very long, can be a scary thought. So, mostly, we leave the precariousness nature of matter to academic consideration. None of us could live day-to-day with that reality front and center - as we know from our struggle over the last 2 years. Yet, for those of us who intentionally set out on a faith journey, we eventually come around to considering the scariness of life. Ultimately, it seems we can't avoid confronting living with unknowns. Considering uncertainty and mystery seems to be inevitable dimension of being a spiritual being having a human experience.

And, for us as Christians, our spiritual journey yearly brings us to the Advent season. In this season, we face into the uneasy nature of life and look for God's presence in our lives and, equally importantly, in the life of our troubled and hurting world. Indeed, our worship in Advent is an invitation to look beyond the obvious because preparing for God's new life entails considering the mystery and uncertainty of life. For like the many characters around Jesus' birth, we also are invited to consider our own birth and place in God's cosmic story.

In our gospel this morning, Jesus invites us into an experience of life's mystery and uncertainty. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars... People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.... Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves...." Using both the heavens above and earth beneath, Jesus points both what is knowable and unknowable. Yes, there is the sun, moon and stars. There are trees, some identifiable as fig trees. Yet there are signs needing interpretation. Seasons turn. Leaves are not always seen on branches. Roots are, in fact, there, but they are also hidden.

Yet, Jesus points to more than mystery. Jesus is in the midst of life's mystery as God's voice calling us beyond our sense of smallness and helplessness. He reveals to us a life lived in full awareness of our place in a cosmic story. He speaks as Holy One who emptied himself to become human like us and dwelt among us. Jesus calls us to trust in God's larger cosmic story. The sun, moon and stars are signs of God's Presence. Trees, "things seen and unseen", as the Creed proclaims, trunks and roots.

In the turning of the seasons, after the leaves sprout and figs ripen, trees become bare. There is a larger story for us to trust. There is a larger pattern of life always and forever unfold before us, among and within us.

This unfolding of God's energy and life is sometimes hard to see in the present...but we trust is here none the less. In presence and parable, Jesus invites us to trust God's hidden love, an energy embedded in all life itself. This trust can open and strengthen us to face life's mysteries - those which threaten us and those which delight.

However, this deep, faithful trust does not mindlessly happen. Trust is a spiritual grace requiring vulnerability. Such trust can't be borrowed from someone else. Nor can our trust yesterday be pulled out for today. Trust is like the manna in the wilderness. Each of us must harvest our own day of trust and then, gather trust again tomorrow. And paradoxically, our ability to trust is increased only one way: by trusting.

Personally, I'm entering this Advent with a heightened awareness of trust. Almost two weeks ago, I had emergency surgery to reattach the retina in my right eye. During the procedure, a gas bubble is placed in the eye to hold the retina as it heals. Some of you who were here last Sunday may have noticed I sat in the pew and needed someone to guide me around. Besides blurry vision, sight in only one eye affected my equilibrium and depth perception. I didn't feel steady. I couldn't trust my steps on the stairs. I didn't trust my body. So, my husband, Daniel, had to be more than my chauffeur and valet last Sunday, as we jokingly say. He had to be a steady arm and others offered theirs as well. I had to trust others eyes and balance to do what I so mindlessly would normally do.

This recent medical event has left me with a heightened awareness of the deep, emotional and physical importance of the spiritual dimension of trust. Now, I consider myself someone with an assessable reservoir of trust. Yet, my life story has the usual incidents when a person or community didn't prove trustworthy - a family member, a college group, an authority figure. Each time threw off me off balance and caused me to question myself and the world around me. Also, there were times in which my decisions and actions caused others to distrust me and, when I acted as a priest, caused other to question the church as a whole.

Trust has that kind of power and potential to radiate far beyond the center. Trust is that critical - to our physical and emotional balance and the spiritual status of our relationships. It is no wonder that Jesus frequently calls his followers to examine the place and their healthy ability to trust and to decide in what and in whom.

Jesus holds up family, politics, religion, and finances as arenas in which issues of trust play out. Then, while acknowledging where we instinctively place trust, Jesus moves us beyond these obvious places of our trust to the source and origin of life itself: God as creator, redeemer and spirit. Such a move of trust takes more than another's steady arm. Such a move takes more than finding a place in a community. Trust in God comes, as all trust comes and grows, by believing God is present in the chaos. God's pattern of new life emerging from the dark, the void and unknown is unfailing. In our hunger and search for equilibrium, God's love for us and the world, revealed in Jesus Christ, provides balance and peace. Amen.