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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year C: Luke 21:25-36

It has been interesting to observe human behavior now that the pandemic has affected our buying habits. We all know that it isn't easy to get a new car these days, because the widgets and gadgets with which cars are made aren't making their way into the supply chain, thanks, in part, to the pandemic. So, apparently, there are thousands of partially- or fully-assembled vehicles sitting somewhere with these pieces missing and, hence, making them undrivable and, of course, unsellable.

But a car is, well, a big thing. I've noticed that little things, like my favorite brand of "slightly sweetened" iced tea has been hard to come by, too. Where it used to be is now empty racks upon empty racks in our convenience store coolers, and our available choices of beverage are more limited than they once were. So, I would conclude that something somewhere in the production and distribution of my favorite brand of iced tea has gone amiss.

I can't say, though, that going without a new car or a favorite brand of iced tea are real hardships. In modern history, we can think of times of much greater scarcity, like the Great Depression or the Second World War. During the Depression, you couldn't buy anything because you couldn't afford it. By World War Two, you probably had more money but you couldn't spend it on anything be-

cause everything was rationed. I don't think, in our lifetimes, at least, we'll ever see that kind of scarcity because we're able to produce so much more now, and produce it with greater efficiency.

Yet none of this will undo our tendency to want things, and, if we have even the most cursory grasp of the Bible and the Christian faith, we know that we need to temper our wants. We need to temper them because, especially in our consumer culture, we can get so wrapped up in acquiring things for ourselves that we forget to give of ourselves to others, particularly to those who have real needs that are far more acute than our petty wants. But, besides this social dimension to the Christian faith, there's a spiritual dimension. Our spirituality requires us to be watchful during this season. (Yes, it's already Advent...whew!)

And this season begins -- rather jarringly, one might say -- with exhortations from Jesus about the end times, as we look to our Gospel text. This raises the question of the appropriateness of such a text for the season. We should be preparing for the coming of Christ as the newborn King in Bethlehem, shouldn't we? So why do we have this text about preparing for the One who is to come in the end times? This, I believe, is due to the fact that the Church lives in a "both/and" reality. We do not see Christ's Advent among us as an "either/or" reality, as in either "Christ comes to us as an infant in the Bethlehem stable" or "Christ comes to us as the Righteous Judge at the end of time." Instead, it is

a matter of both Christ coming to us as an infant in the Bethlehem stable and Christ coming to us as the Righteous Judge at the end of time. Regardless of which of these are in front of us at the moment, we prepare in the same manner. In truth, both are in front of us all the time simultaneously.

Jesus, therefore, urges us to see the signs, to look at the fig tree (or, perhaps, a tree better suited to your Plant Hardiness Zone), and to be watchful. As for the last of these three, Jesus' words are particularly direct; he says, "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 earth" (Luke 21:34-35). These are the sorts of pitfalls and distractions of life in this world that take our heart, mind, and devotion away from the things that Jesus calls us to focus on...like the coming of the Kingdom.

Now, Jesus names three things -- "dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life" -- that are contrary to the watchfulness that he urges. Two of this would ordinarily be regarded as "naughty" things, as in pleasures of the flesh like sex and inebriation. Granted, these can still be problems for people, but I'm actually more interested in the phrase "the worries of this life." This is a rather vague phrase, but it conveniently lends itself to a number of interpretations and applications. Eariler, I mentioned our consumerist impulses and how they've been affected

by the pandemic. I believe that, at least since we stopped practicing subsistence agriculture, we are born consumers, which has added immensely to our "worries of this life," as Jesus would put it. Preoccupying ourselves with having the best and newest of our consumer good of choice diverts a lot of time away from more important things, like God, family, and relationships...probably not exactly what Jesus had in mind, but still something among our "worries of this life."

None of us, of course, will ever stop being consumers, unless we go completely "off the grid" and stay there. But we can at least be aware of the pitfalls we can encounter and errors we can commit if we become too beholden to our consumerist impulses. As an illustration, I'd like us to consider something economists call the law of diminishing marginal utility, which, put simply, states that the more one consumes, the less one gets out of it. For obvious reasons, illustrations of this law work better with luxury items than with basic necessities. Naturally, I'm going to use an example from the world of...fine dining.

Picture yourself at one of the best steakhouses in the country. You've just ordered a choice-cut filet mignon that the steakhouse has aged in its on-site locker and then has carved by the head chef. The waiter brings it out, and, as you've been sipping from hundred-dollar-per-bottle Cabernet prior to the main course, you wait in great anticipation of the first bite. The steak, along with your favorite side dish, is placed in front of you. Then,

you cut into it, bring the fork up to your mouth, and it is magnificent!

Now, a few minutes later, you've gotten to your fifth and then your tenth bites, and, you must admit, this is still a pretty darn good steak. But then later, as you're approaching your final bites, you're just not able to enjoy that steak in the same way you were at the beginning. That's basically the law of diminishing marginal utility. It's such a good example to use, I think, during this time of year...where consumerism explodes in a very crass and uncontrolled way. As we apply that to our own spiritual practices, we quickly find that more consumption does not equal more satisfaction; consumption just has us spiraling down an abyss of unsatisfaction and becomes among several of our "worries of this life." So, we'd be better off doing less of it.

And we can apply the law of diminishing marginal utility a number of ways, by asking ourselves some simple questions like, "Is the sixty thousand dollar car twice as good as the thirty thousand dollar car?" or "Will I be twice as happy with sixteen pairs of shoes instead of eight (or twelve cars instead of six)?" When Jesus speaks of "the worries of this life," he lists them among "naughty" things like sexual immorality and drunkenness, which can get us into all sorts of trouble, but "the worries of this life" usually aren't naughty, but can control us just as negatively, if not more so. They can take us away from the life, love, and freedom that Jesus grants us and make us prisoners to greed and

desire.

Thus, Jesus says, "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 21:36). If we are caught, when Jesus comes, occupying ourselves with the worries of this life, we won't be prepared to receive him, whether as the newborn King in the Bethlehem stable or as the Righteous Judge at the end of time. But if we clear some of that worldly clutter out of our lives, we will experience a peace and a liberation thanks to a release from these things that once held us captive.

Christ is coming...and desires nothing other than to bring us salvation. That is his greatest gift, that we might belong to him and be rescued from sin and death. Isn't that more important than "the worries of this life"? Of course it is, and thankfully our Lord shows us another way...the way of watchfulness for his glorious Kingdom to come.

Amen.