

Attention

First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2023

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Scripture

Mark 13:24-37

“But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

“Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Sermon

Several years ago, I came across a quote by the 20th-century French philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil (1909-1943). I was first introduced to Weil in seminary and have always appreciated her depth of insight and wisdom. She made this astonishing claim: “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” [1] What we give our attention is an expression of love and grace; attention requires a generous spirit from us; it requires generosity.

What Weil did not know is that what we give our attention to actually changes how we experience reality, and it even changes the neural structure of the brain, which is “plastic” and

constantly changing. Daniel J. Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, has written extensively on this process. "Where attention goes," he explains, "neural firing flows, and neural connection grows." [2] Attention is essentially connecting, and where connections are made—in our brains or hearts, with people or places or things, or with God in prayer—we are changed. This means that we ought to give special thought and care to what we attend.

The contemporary writer who has done perhaps the most to help us understand how we experience reality is Iain McGilchrist, a great genius of our time whose thoughts will have an enormous impact for centuries. I have come to value his writings and insights. Psychiatrist, neuroscience researcher, philosopher (with a deep appreciation for Christianity), and literary scholar McGilchrist wrote a groundbreaking book, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World* (2009). This was followed by his magisterial two-volume work *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World* (2021), of which one Oxford professor says, "This is one of the most important books ever published. And yes, I do mean *ever*." [3]

McGilchrist defines attention as "the manner in which our consciousness is disposed towards whatever else exists." "The choice," he explains, "we make of how we dispose our consciousness is the ultimate creative act: it renders the world what it is. It is, therefore, a moral act: it has consequences." And *this*, it seems to me, has substantial theological implications for how we walk in faith and face the world. And it seems particularly relevant as we walk through Advent.

The "little apocalypse" in Mark's Gospel (13), which we hear every three years on the First Sunday of Advent, tells us to "Beware." "Keep alert." "Keep awake." The imperatives of Advent. We could add others. "Prepare." "Awake" or "Wake up." Advent is a time to heighten awareness, to focus our thinking, feeling, and perceiving so that we're ready for the coming day of the Lord. Advent is about expectancy and waiting, even active waiting. Perhaps we should add another imperative, "Pay attention." Or, simply, "Be attentive."

As I shared in the *Winter Messenger*, which came out yesterday, this Advent, I feel called to be more conscious of what I'm *attending*. Where am I placing my attention? What and whom is receiving my attention? I want to be attentive to the Spirit's presence as we wait. This is serious business. As McGilchrist explains: "Attention changes the world. How [we] attend to it changes what it is [we] find there. ...Attention is not just another 'cognitive function': it is... the disposition adopted by one's consciousness towards the world. Absent, present, detached, engaged, alienated, empathic, broad or narrow, sustained or piecemeal, it therefore has the power to alter whatever it meets. Since our consciousness plays some part in what comes into being, the play of attention can both create and destroy, but it never leaves its object unchanged. So how you attend to something — or don't attend to it — matters a very great deal."

"Seek," Jesus said, "and you will find" (Matthew 7:7). "Seek and you *will* find." The finding is connected to the seeking. We have to seek, search, attend.

May we seek and find and meet him anew this Advent, may he be born again in us this Christmastide and light our way into Epiphany and beyond. And, as we begin this journey here at this Table, may we attend to the presence of the Risen Lord here at this Table, may we come with full attention to this meal, bringing our whole selves to the Table. How we attend changes what we will discover *here* and through Advent.

Sources

- [1] Simone Weil, *The First and Last Notebooks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- [2] Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*.
- [3] Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World* (Perspectiva, 2021). For more about McGilchrist, see channelmcgilchrist.com; there are many video interviews with him on YouTube.