Seeking God's Face in the Still, Dark Time
December 3, 2023 – First Sunday of Advent
St Francis' Episcopal Church, Eureka, Missouri
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As an urban farmer, this is one of my favorite times of the year. The moment of rest after the rush of final harvest, time to reflect on the joy and challenges of the past growing season, the quiet and stillness of the fallow earth.

It is no coincidence that Advent begins as the harvest ends. Our ancestors, these holy ones who wrote the scriptures we just heard, lived in a deep and intimate relationship with all of creation and earth's natural cycles in ways we simply cannot understand. Through this relationship they came to know and enter into a covenant with God. They marked the days, seasons and holy times by sun and moon's movement through the heavens. Take a moment and think about all of the natural imagery we heard in today's scriptures -- mountains quaking, fire kindling, water boiling, leaves blowing in the wind. In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "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." Every May, the unfurling of the fig leaves at our Farm signals the time to plant summer crops as we know the heat has fully and finally arrived.

So what does this season teach us as individuals, as a community? What can we learn from our eco-system as we step onto the path of Advent? Dark, cold, stillness, characterize this season of fallowness -- this time of Advent.

As we turn towards the Winter Solstice, night lengthens. The darkness of our days envelops us. The daily news, the challenges in our own lives can be hard to face. Yet, in our time, the fears of the night are the same as those faced by our ancestors. Wars and natural catastrophes, instability and insecurity, poverty and hunger, illness and death. Our pain when faced with this darkness can tempt us to despair. Feeling as if, in the words of Isaiah today, God's face is hidden from us. In the midst of our sorrow, our weakness,

our captivity, our mourning, we yearn to see God's face. But how do we even seek God's face in the darkness?

For our ancestors, the fallow days of winter were a time of communal vulnerability. Would the harvest be plentiful enough to survive until Spring? During these past years, we have experienced large scale communal vulnerability, the very world feels as if it is quaking as we move from pandemic to war to natural disasters, to increasing poverty. Our hearts have been bruised and broken in these times in so many ways. It is tempting to look away, to protect ourselves, to give into fear, anxiety and despair.

Our ancestors knew this temptation. Frequently. In their wisdom grown from this experience, they created time set apart. Holy days and seasons such as The Lord's Day. Advent. Lent. Aligned with the earth's cycles, these spaces gave individuals and the community time to rest, refocus, and regenerate. Time to be vulnerable with ourselves and with others doing the hard work of repentance and repair. Time to release what binds us to the past and what no longer serves our flourishing in the future. Time to understand our deepest fears and yearnings. Time to come home to our best and highest selves. Time to come face to face with each other, with the whole of creation and in doing so, see the Face of God once more.

For it is in seeing the Divine in each face we encounter that we come to know and understand how God calls us to love more deeply. Grounded in the interconnection of all creation, seeing each face fully – each face in this church, this community, in this very land – we come to know how to serve more fully.

There is a beautiful Hebrew word, Avodah which means worship, serve, and work – all at once. Its depth meaning is to be an active partner with the God Who Loves, in healing and repairing the whole of creation. St. Francis you are a community of avodah – knowing the God Who Loves all people and being compelled by that love to worship, love and serve. You have planted a beautiful garden of love and service as you seek to be a place of welcome, to care for those most vulnerable in your church and broader community, to

steward this land upon which you have made your home. Your harvest is bountiful, providing the seeds for the future. Gardeners save seeds for future planting from their strongest plants and share these seeds with others. Your harvest is indeed bountiful.

As you step into this time set apart, onto this Advent path, may you be blessed with rest and ease to reflect on the joys and challenges of the past year. May you take time to look deeply into the faces of each other, those you serve, the whole of creation and see God's invitation to you, individually and communally. As you respond, may you choose the seeds for planting with mindfulness and prayer. Trust that during these fallow months, winter storms, along with the cold and dark prepare the soil and the seeds to flourish come Spring. May you embrace earth's silence so you may hear the still, quiet voice within. For the Winter Solstice is a profound stillpoint. In the extreme north, the sun does not rise or seem to move for three full days. It is no coincidence that Christmas occurs at this dark, still time. For it is in the light of God's Countenance that we can see clearly in the dark.