

Sermon, *How Is It with Your Heart*  
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 12.1.24

Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent. As many of you know, I just got back from a 9-day cruise over Thanksgiving. It feels like I have been gone for a month. We had a great time. Over the past five years, I have learned that this congregation will hear the sermon better if I briefly talk about my vacation first. So, here we go. On the Thursday before Thanksgiving, Christi and I boarded the Celebrity Cruise ship, Constellation, in Tampa. It's our second time on that particular ship and we love it. There is a saltwater pool in a solarium at the 10<sup>th</sup> level that is so buoyant I can float in it and read a book. But, instead of reading, I was happy to just watch the clouds roll by. Constellation is small compared to many other ships out there – she has 2,200 passengers and can fit under the Skyway Bridge at high tide. We think it's the perfect size. We departed Tampa for New Orleans – it was the first time in the city for us. We then had two sea days and arrived at Roatan (an island 34 miles off the coast of Honduras) where we went on an uncomfortable snorkeling trip which I'll probably preach about later. We then set sail for Costa Maya on the Yucatan peninsula and then to the island of Cozumel, and then back to Tampa arriving Saturday (yesterday). We had a wonderful time together; we didn't want it to end; but we are back safe and sound.

You might wonder what this cruise has to do with today's Gospel lesson featuring Jesus talking about the end times. There are a couple of connections points – one being that changes comes without asking permission. Change happens even while on vacation and no one asks our opinion (it can be a change in the menu – the ship ran out of peaches and tomato juice – or a favorite performer didn't make it on at port). The End Times will come without asking permission too. Another point is that some passengers were happy that the cruise was over; they really wanted to get off the ship. We, on the other hand, did not. What sounds like a scary Gospel message to us about the End Times sounded like good news to others. In particular, Luke's Christian community at the latter part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century were probably ready for the times to end. And yet, there were most likely people then, as now, who want the times to keep on going. Neither of those two groups of people were asked their opinion – the time just came, as Jesus calls it, "like a thief in the night". It makes me reflect that many things happen in life without our input or opinion. Jesus talked about in the Gospel lesson that changes are coming to the stars, the sun and the sea. He didn't say, "What would you like to have happen?" Or, "What changes would you like to see in the stars and the sun and sea?" No, he said these things will happen – ready or not; no input from us. Period. But, he doesn't leave us there with worry. He then says we need to guard our hearts from being weighed down by worry. Reading this in a 21st-century perspective, I hear Jesus saying this: Change will happen without your input – society, your family, even your own body will age and change without asking permission. What Jesus wants to know is how is it with your heart with all of these changes?

Jesus wants to know how our heart is doing in amongst a time of fear, uncertainty and great foreboding. How is it with your heart?

Have you ever talked to someone who is heavy laden with worry? They look as if they are weighed down. Although it is psychological, worry has a physical manifestation. I have talked with people who have walked into my office looking like they were carrying a 30 lb. backpack.

After talking and praying with them, they physically looked different. They handed over their fear to God through prayer. They walked away looking lighter weight. Jesus wants to know how much weight our heart is holding with worry. With all the changes that are happening everywhere, Jesus is concerned about your heart and how you are handling worry and fear. He also asks that we cast all our concern and worry and fear onto him. In fact, he calls those who are heavy laden and are carrying heavy burdens to come to him. He will lift the weight of worry from our hearts. With all the changes that have happened and will happen, Jesus asks, *how is it with your heart?*

Over vacation, being unplugged from all media (except for the Seahawks game on Sunday), I got to thinking about algorithms. For instance, the NY Times print edition has an algorithm. They will show you a couple of interesting stories on the front page but you don't get to read the entire story – you have to flip through some pages to get to the rest of the story. But, on the way, you'll see other stories you are interested in (and advertisements along the way) to capture your attention. This isn't good or bad, it's just an algorithm. It's how they distribute news and stay in business. They've been doing it this way since 1851. As long as you know the algorithm, it will help guard your heart.

Before we left on the cruise, I was minding my own business and the local evening news was on. They said at 7 minutes after the hour: *There is activity forming in the western Caribbean, stay tuned for more details.* Our ship was heading to the western Caribbean so of course I was interested. 22 minutes later: *Invest 98 will remain a thunderstorm producing system and will fall apart in a few days.* Sigh... I just wasted 22 minutes worrying about something that I did not need to worry about. Although it feels bad, or seems full of trickery – to string viewers along like that – it's really it's just an algorithm. It's how they dispense news and stay in business. It was my fault for not recognizing the algorithm and guarding my heart.

Gossip has an algorithm. Bad news or condescending stories about our neighbors get passed along. This is an ancient algorithm that the Book of Proverbs warns us about. Gossip's algorithm is older than Moses and existed before Abraham was called by God. The question is, how is gossip with your heart? Jesus is wondering if you are guarding your heart or are you falling into its algorithm.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen an advancement in algorithms when it comes to electronic media. It is employed by social networking sites, online news sources, shopping apps, online games; you name it, if it's on your computer or on your phone, it has an algorithm that is trying to keep you on your device/app/site for as long as possible. Here's the difficult part for me – one way to keep you on your device is to weigh your heart down with worry or to make you feel bad about yourself. The hook is that they will help you with your worry (which is just a trap to keep you worried) or to make you feel better about yourself (but, it's an empty promise). One way to answer Jesus' question – how is it with your heart – is to look at the algorithms that are at play with the media you consume and with your electronic devices. Look at those systems and ask yourself if you are being filled with angst in your heart or are they helping you to unload your worry and anxiety. Jesus understands algorithms. He'll also let you make your own decisions. All the while, he wants to know how is it with your heart?

All Angels has an algorithm. Our front page, if you will, is worship. The algorithm of our worship focuses on gratitude, joy, and prayer for others in need. From our worship, we then flow into fellowship with education. Fellowship then flows into outreach – helping others in need. When we have fellowship with one another, we learn about our neighbors and ourselves. The natural algorithm of that is then to help one another. The more we help people, the more we want to engage in worship with gratitude, joy and prayer. The more we do that, the more that we then have fellowship and on and on. It's our algorithm. It's designed to lift burdens and worry from your heart. The heart that has been lifted is a heart that inclines toward worship and fellowship and outreach.

There is a lot in this world and in our own society that we cannot control. Changes come without asking permission or advice. If we are aware of the algorithms of media, of gossip, of our electronic devices, it helps us navigate changes that are all around us. And, it helps us to focus on our heart and to answer Jesus's question: how is it with your heart.