

1 Advent Dec. 1, 2024 Don't Look Down

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, Wisconsin

It was perhaps the ugliest, most *non*-athletic downhill ski run in history. But it gives us the same lesson from today's Gospel that also included some unattractive and distressing things. The downhill ski run happened several years ago, and is recounted by the skier himself, John Ortberg in his bestselling book *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. It all started when one of John's friends opened a winter sports camp in the Swiss Alps and gifted John and his wife a stay at his facilities. John had never downhill skied before, so he started by making a few runs at what all you experienced skiers know is called the bunny hill. Those simple and easy runs went so well, John felt he was ready for something more adventurous, (that's the word he used) so he and his wife hopped onto a ski lift and up and away they went.

John's wife is terrified of heights, and when the ski lift suddenly rose hundreds of feet into the air, she tightly grabbed the pole in the middle of the lift. She glared at her husband and said something like, "I love you deeply, but this is my pole. And if you so much as look at it you will meet Jesus today." John laughed good naturedly at her, shrugged, and said what a lot of people say in those types of situations, "Don't look down."

Little did he know his own words were soon going to come back to him.

John and his wife got off the lift and took a T-bar for the final part of the ascent to the top of the mountain. However, they both fell off before they reached the top. No one was hurt, as they landed in deep, soft snow. John said other skiers on the T-bar above them shouted advise, but not being able to speak their language, the only word he could make out was Dummkopf.

Then a man named Hans took pity on John and his wife and jumped off the T-bar and came over to help them. He led them through hip deep snow to the nearest slope, and John couldn't help but notice it was marked with a black diamond and skull and crossbones. That's never a good sign. The slope went down at a steep 85-degree angle and John felt the fear every bit of his inexperience justified.

That is when John received what he said was the only skiing lesson in his life. Hans, who spoke only a little English, told him, "Don't look down. You will be frightened by the slope and overwhelmed by the distance. When new skiers look down, they panic. And when they face straight ahead on a slope this steep..." Here Hans's English failed him, and he made a whistling sound and hand motion John did not find encouraging. "I *think* you can make it," Hans said as he finished the lesson, putting a lot of emphasis on the word *think*, "Just remember one thing: Don't look down."

John writes *don't look down* "became the number one rule" in his life as he slowly skied down that hill. Nothing could make him look down. He said children skied between his legs trying to distract him by tempting him to watch them, but he didn't look down. People skied past him and took the lift up again, just to count how many times they could lap him. But he didn't look down.

By slowly, continuously making cautious zig-zag snowplow turns, and by not looking down, John made it to the bottom of the hill.

Although Jesus never literally says it, those same three words – Don't Look Down - could be considered another way to translate today's Gospel when Jesus described signs and disasters that could also be frightening and overwhelming and then told listeners to "stand up and raise your heads." After telling a parable about trees leafing out in the spring Jesus encouraged his listeners to pay attention to what is happening around them without being dragged down by disappointing, frightening, even disastrous events or by other people. To me, this sounds a lot like John Ortberg's one and only skiing lesson: Don't look down.

That's good advice for us as we begin both a new church year and the season of Advent. In addition to getting ready to celebrate Christmas, Advent is a season where the church takes a cue from Jesus and reminds us the world is far from perfect, and even though Jesus has risen, God's Kingdom has only started to come to earth as it is in heaven; and this will create more conflict as the former ways will struggle to hold on and keep power and prestige. God's Kingdom won't fully manifest until Jesus returns. In the meantime, there will be some changes, and there will be uncertainty which can cause distress. There will be discouragement, there will be many temptations to get distracted by those things, which will have the same result as if John had looked down when skiing down a steep slope.

We followers of Jesus are waiting for his return, and in today's Gospel Luke gives us a Jesus seemed to understand waiting won't be easy, no matter what generation we are in, because the same kinds of things happen today that happened two thousand years ago, in Jesus' day. Jesus encourages us to manage that difficulty by not looking down. Distressed by signs or changes in the sky or weather? Don't look down. Anxious over the conflicts between nations that pop into our news feeds every hour? Don't look down. Overwhelmed by the messages of fear and foreboding about what might happen next? Jesus' message is consistent: Don't look down.

It might help us to consider if we aren't supposed to look down, where should our attention be? In most sermons the answer will always be Jesus, he is the center of our church year and our faith. If we are paying attention, if we aren't distracted or weighed down by the weight of the world, we might be more aware of the places and ways God's love through Jesus is breaking into the world. Sometimes its in rather dramatic ways like a church in the Madison area that has decided to tear down its old building and put up a new one that will not only have a sanctuary for church services and offices, it will also have public space and affordable apartments. This is an effort to respond to the growing need for affordable housing in that church's neighborhood. Other times it will be smaller, like someone paying for the groceries of the person behind them at the checkout in the grocery store. Other times it is adopting or fostering a cat or dog from the Humane Society or someone else who found a stray. Or the pastoral care team here at St. Matthias who is asking for hats and mittens they are going to give away to anyone who wants or needs them this month. Will these things change the world? Probably not. But they can change the lives of the people who will live in the new apartments, or the person who has their groceries paid for, or the pets that are given homes or the people who are warm on cold days. And who knows what will come of that?

The point is all these things are signs there is another way, the way of Jesus that is an active part of the world. Some people, especially religious people, call this hope, which happens to be the theme for this first week in the Season of Advent. And when we pay attention to hopeful things, we are not looking down. Like any skill hope requires practice, as our Advent devotionals remind us. The more we practice hope, the more hopeful we'll become, and we will not only notice the hopeful presence of Jesus around us, we will become more inspired to be that hopeful presence in what we do and say.

Like all disciplines, it usually starts simply. Also like all disciplines, we will fall out of practice; and when that happens, all it takes is something simple to help remind us and get back in the practice. Perhaps one simple thing we can do this first Sunday in Advent is reconnect with Jesus' reminder that no matter what happens around us to not look down. You might want to write the three words *Don't Look Down* on a note and put it on your door to remind you before you leave your house no matter what happens that day to not look down. Or maybe you want to write *Don't Look Down* on a piece of colored tape to put on the corner of your computer, so that as you deal with emails and news stories you remember to keep your focus on Jesus. I'm sure *you* know the best way to remind yourself not only during Advent but every day that no matter what ugliness or distressing events attempt to overwhelm you, to remember one thing that not only helped an inexperienced skier get down a dangerous slope, it is the same advice Jesus gives us to get through the challenges and adventures of life: Don't look down.