

2025 Advent Daily Devotional

The Parable of the Fig Tree

Matthew 24:32–35

2025 Advent Worship Schedule

Chapel in the Pines

November 30: worship at 9:15 and 11:00

December 7: worship at 10:00; Jordan Heinzl-Nelson, preaching

December 14: worship at 10:00; potluck after worship

December 21: worship at 10:00; lessons and carols

December 24: Christmas Eve worship at 4:00 and 7:00 P.M.

The Parable of the Fig Tree

Matthew 24:32–35

³² “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. ³³ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Introduction

In the past, I have written a daily Advent devotional that covers several scriptures from both the Old and New Testaments. This year, I am writing daily reflections based on only a handful of verses from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus told the Parable of the Fig Tree as part of his response to the question about the signs of the end of the age: “When will this be, and what will be the signs of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3).

This is a poignant question in Advent. The word “advent” means “coming toward,” and it refers not only to the Christ taking flesh as the baby Jesus but also to the Messiah’s return to establish the kingdom of God on Earth. *When will this return be?* The fig tree teaches us about anticipation and preparation, “but about that day and hour no one knows” (Matthew 24:36). We can study for signs, yet we can never be fully prepared.

So, what is the parable about?

I hear parables spoken about as if they were a riddle with only one meaning. However, I think Jesus told parables that do not have an easy ending. A parable challenges us to think, “Well, what am I supposed to do now?” For that reason, a parable might be an irritant, meaning something that gets under our skin and causes us to reconsider what we had thought to be a nice, neat package. The faithful can only pay attention and trust that, whatever happens, God is with us—our Lord Emmanuel.

It helps to breathe, and so I’ve included breath prayers at the end of each devotional. Inhale and exhale with the short phrases or perhaps other words that are more useful to you.

My prayer is that a daily meditation on the Parable of the Fig Tree will be helpful to you in deepening your spiritual reflection during this Advent season and beyond. Let us pray:

O God of peace, who has taught us that in stillness we attain knowledge of you, we pray in quiet confidence for your saving Word to come to us whenever we open our hearts and minds. Illumine our understanding so that this devotional will speak of comfort, challenge, and grace. In Christ’s name, Amen.

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- Jordan Heinz-Nelson wrote three of these devotionals.

Week 3 (December 14–December 20): “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

Week 2 (December 21–December 24): “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Day 1: November 30

“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.”

To my knowledge, no fig trees grow on the property of Chapel in the Pines. Of course, there are many evergreens around our church. There are also two beech trees on either side of the sidewalk as you approach the main entrance. I can see one from my office window. As of this writing, nearly all the leaves are yellow, yet few have fallen. But I know they will be on the ground soon, maybe even by the time you read this.

The lesson of this beech tree is that winter is near.

The parable's tree is at the opposite end of the seasonal cycle, but the message is the same: life is change. All is temporary. The grass withers, the flower fades; the trees put forth their leaves, then drop them.

However, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

The Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 136).

INHALE: All is change.

EXHALE: God is good.

Day 2: December 1

“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.”

In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, only God is the subject of the verb “to create.” Humans are capable of fashioning, forming, making, planting, building, writing, and performing various other action verbs, but only God is capable of creating.

I think there’s freedom in that. Yes, we are called to be the world's light and the earth's salt, but we act in response to God's grace. My late mentor, Brian Doyle, used to talk about “catching stories” rather than creating them. The stories were out in the world, and the writer’s job was to “catch” them on paper. The Gaelic word for storycatcher is “seanchaí” (pronounced "shan-a-key"). This role is like that of a Hebrew prophet who spoke only when "the Word of the Lord came upon them."

What is out there for you to “catch” today? As Marilynne Robinson wrote, “I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, but merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes.”

INHALE: I am here.

EXHALE: I am open.

Day 3: December 2

“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.”

Consider a tree, any tree. I’m looking at an oak that is visible from my home. I’m thinking about all the life that makes this tree a home—spiders, bugs, songbirds, and squirrels.

Now, I consider the wood floor in my home and the wood boards that I know are behind the drywall. I write this with a pencil and paper, which also used to be part of a living tree. Think of our beautiful sanctuary. Those wooden beams also come from trees. I am filled with gratitude for these trees.

Perhaps the creatures who make their homes in living trees are likewise grateful in their ways for their home. We can join in giving thanks, whether they are birds, bugs, or even that rascal squirrel stealing seed from my neighbor’s bird feeder!

INHALE: Thank you.

EXHALE: Thank you.

Day 4: December 3

“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.”

It occurs to me that I was too harsh on squirrels in yesterday’s devotional.

If we are to learn from trees and the changing of seasons, then it seems that squirrels are excellent teachers. Squirrels do not live in climate-controlled homes. When the weather turns colder, they know to collect food for the winter. They observe the changing seasons and plan accordingly.

Francis of Assisi observed a young squirrel gathering acorns, an owl feather, and a carelessly discarded piece of red ribbon. Francis mused, “Yes, dear one, you understand: everything imparts God’s grace.”

INHALE: I receive grace.

EXHALE: I share grace.

Day 5: December 4

“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.”

Bob Dunham, pastor emeritus of University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, recommended Allen Levi’s novel, *Theo of Golden*. I love this book. The story revolves around the title character, Theo, an eighty-six-year-old man who mysteriously arrives in the quaint Southern town named Golden.

Theo discovers that a local artist has drawn beautiful portraits of local residents and hung them for sale in a coffee shop. Theo decides to purchase each portrait and then “bestow” them as gifts to each resident. While many residents are suspicious at first, Theo wins them over with his kindness.

Theo meets each resident in front of a fountain in the downtown square of Golden. After they receive their gift, many of the residents confide their sorrows and joys to Theo. The elderly gentleman takes no credit, however; he humbly says, “I simply help people sit still long enough to see what is already there.”

That’s true of this parable. If we quiet our thoughts and open ourselves to God’s presence, we might gain insight into truth that was just waiting for us to recognize.

INHALE: Be still.

EXHALE: Know God.

Day 6: December 5

“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.”

I want to share another scene from the novel *Theo of Golden*.

A resident, who lives without a home, tells Theo a story of tragic prejudice against her. Theo says he is sorry. She replies that he doesn't need to apologize, for it was his fault. Theo acknowledges that he was not directly involved, but then he adds, “Somehow, I fear, we own all of the world's hurts together.”

Christ's teachings about the end of time, such as the Parable of the Fig Tree, are often used to blame others for the sins of the world, as if we were the judges in charge of separating the righteous from the unrighteous. Sadly, such judgment often leads to self-righteousness, which can excuse grievous discrimination against the vulnerable people, like the unsheltered, whom Jesus actually identified with in another parable: “I was a stranger and you invited me in; I needed clothes and you clothed me” (Matthew 25:35).

INHALE: Forgive me.

EXHALE: Forgive all of us.

Day 7: December 6

“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.”

Sometimes, when my thoughts swim in a flood of anxiety, I remember this parable and how Jesus directs our attention to the new leaves that form at the beginning of spring. They are “tender” like all new life.

What is tender in your day? Is there a tenderness toward yourself, tenderness from others, or tenderness in a fleeting moment of encounter? I think tenderness is often something that happens as a great visitation of something extraordinary in the ordinary. I’d call such tenderness a blessing.

My colleague and friend, Lucinda, wrote, “Tenderness is needed to tell someone that their world is smaller than God intends.”

It is easy to focus on what’s wrong, broken, and dying. Jesus does not deny suffering or pain; his crucifixion provides the backdrop for this parable. Yet, he still invites our attention to the extraordinary that God is doing in the world and perhaps, just as extraordinarily, inside of us.

INHALE: God inside.

EXHALE: Tender blessing.

Day 8: December 7 – by Jordan Heinzl-Nelson

“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

This morning, I woke up and, as is my unfortunate habit, immediately checked my phone. I had a message from my sister, sending a playlist of music she thought I might enjoy. This simple message was a reminder of our relationship, our closeness, even as she lives across the country in Denver.

In this verse, we are told that we will “*know that he is near.*” God comes close and draws into intimate relationship with us. I see signs of God’s immanence in the ordinary: the sacred act of eating with others, the beauty of creation, a chance encounter with a stranger, reconnecting with old friends, prayer, a text from a sister.

We look for the signs—for then “you know that he is near.”

INHALE: Give me eyes to see.

EXHALE: God is near.

Day 9: December 8

“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

Emmanuel is God with us—a group of people. When Jesus said, “you see,” he used the plural—y’all see.

Mickey dePrater spoke to this communal reality when she offered in the Women’s Fellowship group on November 18. She prayed, “As important as it is that I know myself, what is really important is that I realize how much I need other people in my life.”

Ross Gay wrote an incredible poem, “To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian.” Readers join the poet on an ordinary day in which he is “tumbling through the city,” apparently preoccupied with his thoughts and worries “without once looking up.” But then, Gay sees a woman sweeping—a simple chore. She draws him out of his lonely thoughts by gesturing up to the ripe figs. He is tall and “good for these things,” so he reaches high into the branches and distributes the fruit to a sudden gathering. The feast transforms people into “strangers maybe never again.”

INHALE: I know myself.

EXHALE: I know I need others.

Day 10: December 9

“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

Matthew previously mentioned "these things" as wars, conflicts, famine, poverty, and natural disasters (Matthew 24:6–7).

In many ways, the American poet James Wright lived through awful things. He was a veteran of World War II, and he witnessed pain and tragedy that he carried with him all his life. He often wrote about war and the cruelty of humans.

Yet, Wright also knew about the beauty of nature. He wrote about trees and spring as well as animals. His poem, “A Blessing,” is about an encounter with two ponies in a field at twilight. This poem ends with the lines:

*... if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.*

Notice how reading printed poem forces your eyes to stop at “break” before moving back to “blossom.” Explaining a poem is a bit like explaining a punchline; it ruins the effect. Yet, I think there is something profound about beauty and truth. Maybe the things that break our hearts can open us to the world.

INHALE: I would break

EXHALE: Into blossom.

Day 11: December 10 – by Jordan Heinzl-Nelson

“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

The Black Seminarians Union at Duke Divinity School hosted a testimony service last night. Various students came forward to share their testimonies. I was struck by the unique way each approached the time of sharing.

One woman, overtaken by the spirit, yelled out and could barely eke out her story for the paroxysm of joy. Another stood and shared in clear, quiet sentences. Another choked out words as tears ran down her cheeks. Another weaved a story with humor and jokes. They shared different stories – about encountering God on a bus, or in prison, or at the deathbed of a father, or in the throws of cancer treatment. But in all the differences, they all spoke in one voice, saying: God is at the gates. These are the signs by which I know that truth.

It took courage to share their stories. And in their vulnerability, we all encountered a living God.

What are the signs that announce God’s presence in your life? How are you called to share those stories with others?

INHALE: God is active.

EXHALE: Hear my story.

Day 12: December 11

“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

I have a wooden fence in my little backyard. As I unlock the gate, someone—a spouse, child, or dog—will greet me with a shout, hug, or wagging tail.

I also understand that gates and fences keep people out.

“One Tree” by Philip Metres includes the poet’s lament that it is “always the same story ... not enough land or light or love.” The poem focuses on the conflict that arises when a fence creates a boundary. The larger question: How do you respond to conflict? Do you tend toward avoidance? Or compromise? Or collaboration? Or competition? Or accommodation?

Notice the alliteration of “land or light or love.” Land is a finite amount. I’m interested in love as infinite, which I believe is what we are saying with “God is love” (1 John 4).

Love is one of the most difficult things to do in human community precisely because there is conflict. Love might seem wishy-washy or impossible. Maybe something for the Beatles to sing.

But if God is love, if God is with us, then it seems to me that we can open the gates of our hearts.

INHALE: God is love.

EXHALE: I will love.

Day 13: December 12 – by Jordan Heinz-Nelson

“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

Hospitality stands at the center of the biblical narrative. Abraham rushes to welcome three strangers and offer food. Rahab welcomes and protects Israelite spies at risk of her own safety. Zacchaeus hosts Jesus and his disciples. Lydia urges Paul and his companions to stay with her. And then there is Jesus—who feeds the multitudes, instructs his followers to invite the poor and disinherited to feasts, and invites us to eat of his own self.

Jesus tells us “he is near, at the very ”gates”—which can also be translated “doors.” The response is clear. Open the door! Welcome him in.

During this season of the year, we extend and receive hospitality regularly. Perhaps in each opportunity for hospitality, there is also an opportunity to receive Christ. Perhaps God’s Kingdom appears each time we gather at table. The Risen Jesus declared, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” (Revelation 3:20)

INHALE: I open the door.

EXHALE: Christ comes in.

Day 14: December 13

“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

As Jordan taught yesterday, “gates” is a common Greek word for an entrance. It could be a door.

In the case of this verse, “gates” could mean something like the pearly gates or the gateway between heaven and earth, between immortality and mortality. But “gates” could also refer to the literal doors of the church! For example, Jesus knocks on such a door in Revelation 3:19–20. Jordan wisely tells us to consider hospitality to friends and strangers alike.

If we think God is “near,” then the Lord is trying to get our community's attention. There is a sense of urgency for us to act—Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of “the fierce urgency of now. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.”

Jesus was clear about his expectations “for vigorous and positive action” of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39).

INHALE: Love God.

EXHALE: Love neighbor.

Day 15: December 14

“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

We have reached a new week and a new verse. I am drawn to the first word—truly.

“Truly” is the translation of the Hebrew word “amen.” There are many verses in the Old Testament where people end their prayers with this word like we do.

“Amen” means “may it be so.”

While we end our prayers with that word, Jesus also began his statement with it. It’s a bit like Spanish starting the sentence with an upside-down exclamation point. Jesus is saying, “¡Presta atención!” Researching the word, I learned that Isaiah calls the Lord “The God of Amen” (Isaiah 65:16). I believe the phrase implies that God not only speaks the truth but embodies the truth. I believe the same about Jesus.

INHALE: God is truth.

EXHALE: ¡Amen!

Day 16: December 15

“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

What about “this generation” witnessing all these things when we are still waiting almost 2,000 years later?

In the context of this original teaching, Jesus was most likely referring to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. There would have been people still alive who had heard Jesus.

For us, hindsight can bring perspective not only to the words of the Bible but also to our lives.

About her novel, *A Wrinkle in Time*, Madeleine L'Engle said, “I can’t possibly tell you how I came to write it... And it was only after it was written that I realized what some of it meant.”

INHALE: This is the day

EXHALE: that the Lord has made.

Day 17: December 16

“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

Thinking about generations “passing away,” a terrible truth is that, until the Messiah’s return, the world moves on. We lose our closely loved one, yet the sun keeps shining and the clouds float as carefree as ever before.

However, I wonder if, since the world moves on, this truth offers perspective. We are quite small in the grand scheme of things. Even the longest life is but a brief sigh in the long swath of history. Having a right-sized or humble approach to our lives might free us to feel all of our feelings in the moment—the pain, sorrow, joy, and peace that surpasses understanding.

INHALE: I am small.

EXHALE: I am loved.

Day 18: December 17

“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

In his newest novel, Wendell Berry wrote, “To his surprise, sometimes will come to him again the memory of how it was.”

This sentence could be written differently, yet the elegance of it causes me to pause. In particular, I relish the phrase “the memory of how it was.” Don’t you have such memories? Maybe of your childhood or career, a previous home or two. Perhaps you have memories of how it was in the church of your childhood, maybe even of how it was at Chapel in the Pines in the beginning. Life changes; things pass away. Sometimes, we grieve this change as loss.

Yet, there are also pleasant sensations of memory when the past is not so much mourned or missed as it is appreciated, even honored. These types of memories can arise from even the smallest experiences. Berry puts it like this: “Some old day he thought he had forgotten, the angle of the light, the motion of the air, a voice calling, a voice answering, the loveliness of it.”

Saved in my phone are messages from people who are now dead. Sometimes, I listen to their voices, and sometimes will come to me again the memory of who they were.

INHALE: Remember

EXHALE: The loveliness of it.

Day 19: December 18

“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

“All these things” is generally taken to be negative, the implication being that things have to get worse before they can get better.

But lately, I have noticed how different people in various walks of my life have mentioned things that restored their faith in humanity. Perhaps it was a small group’s ability to come to a consensus about a difficult subject. Maybe it was a community gathering of diverse people wanting to help. Perhaps it was the resurgence of Carolina men's basketball!

To look for inspiration is not necessarily to deny the reality of suffering; in fact, it may be part of the antidote.

INHALE: Remember

EXHALE: The loveliness of it.

Day 20: December 19

“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

This generation loves memes, and that generation doesn't know how to spell “meme.” This generation walked to school in the snow, uphill both ways, and that generation sees less and less snow because of global warming. This generation is the greatest, and that generation is the most selfish.

People make comments like these, hopefully not around family holiday gatherings. I think there is value in looking at trends in history because I do think, particularly in hindsight, that we can learn from our collective experience.

Yet, the only thing we can say for sure about any generation is that it will pass away. And this should lead to wisdom born from not passing judgment.

INHALE: I am forgiven.

EXHALE: I forgive.

Day 21: December 20

“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

Tikkun olam is a Jewish concept meaning “repairing the world.” Ultimately, only God can bring about the new heaven and new earth, and yet the same God invites us to participate in the healing. I believe Jesus taught this concept: “Blessed are the peacemakers,” he said.

Where in your life are you called to repair? With whom are you called to make peace?

As you consider those questions, I hope you will also look within. By the grace of God, what can be repaired in your life? I am reminded of the saying, “Let the change I wish to see in the world begin with me.” Perhaps this change begins *in us*.

INHALE: God, heal me.

EXHALE: Help me to make peace.

Day 22: December 21

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

This is the last week of Advent 2025. All things come to an end, including heaven and earth.

However, what did Jesus mean by “my words will not pass away”?

The Gospel of John opens, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” But “Word” is singular and often capitalized to indicate a proper noun—a specific person or God.

Here in Matthew, with “words” referring to the act of speech, I think we are to remember Genesis 1. In the beginning, God spoke the world into being. God’s words are like a ripple—they begin at one point, then expand and create. They are “living words” (Isaiah 55:11). This idea is also found in the New Testament (Hebrews 4:12; 1 Peter 1:23).

I’m also drawn to the tiny word “but” in this verse. Heaven and earth shall pass away, along with everything and everyone we love...

But.

Even though much of life and faith is a mystery, I cling to that little word and the hope it represents.

INHALE: All things end.

EXHALE: But Christ’s words live.

Day 23: December 22

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

My colleague and friend, David Hyman, told me a story about a beloved parishioner who died after a long, terrible cancer. On the last day of her life, David knelt beside her bed to pray. He thought she was asleep, but as he began to pray, she roused herself and looked at him. He held her hand and asked if she had any fears. She shook her head and replied, “I’m looking forward to what comes next.”

And then—this is part of the story that gives me goosebumps—David said that she actually giggled. Giggled!

Of course, there were tears of grief in the days, weeks, and years ahead. David also remembers that giggle as a hopeful reminder that the promises of Jesus will not pass away.

INHALE: All things end.

EXHALE: But Christ’s words live.

Day 24: December 23

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Another story from another pastor and personal friend, Michael Haddox:

“I remember his smile,” she said lovingly, as if she was remembering out loud more than talking to me. “He loved to play cards and dance. Sometimes he’d dance with me. Nobody could dance like Daddy.”

Michael didn’t say anything for a moment. He only watched as her face seemed to grow younger with the memories.

“I used to stand on his feet. He’d hold my hands and spin me around ... Just me and him, in the kitchen.”

The woman Michael knows has a wheelchair that holds her in place. She hasn’t danced in years. Time has taken so much, including her memories.

But not on this day. Her memory—of her dad and dancing in the kitchen—came from someplace deeper. Someplace time couldn’t touch.

I know that many of us try to hold on, but everything eventually wears out and breaks. Heaven and earth will pass away.

But according to God’s promise, that’s not how our story ends. While the wheelchair, the broken memories, and the aging body exist, they do not hold the ultimate power. The final word belongs to Jesus because of resurrection.

INHALE: All things end.

EXHALE: But Christ’s words live.

Day 25: December 24

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Over the years, I have known many people with a family Bible. Perhaps they read the Christmas story every Christmas Eve (Luke 2:1–20).

In addition to reading scripture, they record the names and dates of births and deaths in the Bible. Between the pages of holy scripture, they keep obituaries of loved ones. A woman named Martha Tolbert once told me that such stuffing wasn't just a matter of collecting. Her Bible was a sacred space to remember those who came before her, and the act of remembering gave her, as the hymn put it, “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”

I am looking forward to Christmas morning. The presents under the tree and, most importantly, the gift of time with my family.

Yet, on this holy eve, I make time not only for looking forward to what is coming but also for honoring what has already been. I remember those who have passed away and all the qualities they embodied, such as honesty, playfulness, kindness, humility, and mercy. Such memories are a gift that keeps giving.

INHALE: All things end.

EXHALE: But Christ's words live.

Merry Christmas!

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given:
and the government shall be upon his shoulder:
and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor,
the mighty God, the everlasting Father,
the Prince of Peace

—Isaiah 9:6

Mary treasured up all these things,
and pondered them in her heart.

—Luke 2:19