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Sermon—2Dec18
Luke 21
“Fatal Distraction”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

We hear a lot these days about *distractions*.

Office workers have trouble focusing on their projects because they are constantly interrupted by emails and text messages about other matters.

Things have become seriously distracting on the highways. Drivers talk on the phone instead of giving their full attention to the road. Pedestrians crossing the street put themselves in harm's way because they're looking at their phones instead of watching the cars around them.

So we find that the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples 2,000 years ago that we heard in today's Gospel speak to us, today. Jesus said, “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

In this passage, Jesus is foretelling the coming of the Messiah at the end of the world. Many early Christians thought this event might occur in their lifetimes. As it happened, that belief proved to be in error. The world didn't end.

As a result, Christians came to see the doctrine of the Second Coming instead as a reminder of the fragility of human life. Because life is uncertain, we need to be prepared to meet our Maker.

The Final Judgment didn't occur. But followers of Jesus still paid attention to his words because they realized that it was always possible that God might pronounce judgment upon them—either in this life, or after they died.

Thinking about meeting their Maker certainly helped the early Christians to stay alert! And this Advent theme of judgment is all the more reason for us to share the widespread interest these days in what is called, “*mindfulness*.”

To be mindful is to be the opposite of distracted. It is to be focused—to be mentally and spiritually concentrated on the subject at hand.

So, for example, when we say to a friend who is facing a crisis, “Our thoughts and prayers are with you,” we should really mean what we say! We should choose our words carefully; they should express our genuine feelings.

A mindful person is, as Jesus advised, “alert.” She is aware of the subjects that she spends her time thinking about. She finds it useful to ask herself if all of those thoughts are really worthy of her attention?

For if we want to reach mindfulness, we will first need to get rid of the unwelcome occupants of our mental space. A good example of this need for mental sorting out is *resentment*.

Maybe you spend a large amount of your thinking time being angry at a noisy neighbor. This is an especially common problem in cities like ours, where people live so close to each other.

Say your neighbor has a barking dog or a loud television. Or the neighbor hosts parties that go on into the early morning. You are faced with the noise, and you can't stop thinking about it—even when you're not at home!

Although your problem isn't a large one in the great scheme of things, it definitely disrupts your inner life. Of course, if you think about it, you realize that your priorities are a bit

out of line. You discover that your relationship with God-- the Creator of the Universe--is being marred by a person who happens to live next to you!

This may not be the only barrier you encounter to mindfulness. You may find that your head contains all sorts of mental debris that's left over from past experiences.

It is unlikely that you will ever be able to get rid of all that rubble. But with some effort, you may be able to lessen the impact it has on your daily life.

For instance, if you want to address that mental debris, you might start with something easy. Start with *the beginning of your day*—the time when your mood for your whole day can be set in place.

You might think of a verse from the Bible. You could repeat to yourself, “This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will be glad and rejoice in it.”

I once read a magazine article about a graphic designer. The designer reported that she “began each day with *thirty grateful breaths*.”

“Thirty grateful breaths.” The designer didn't say whether or not she was a Christian--but we Christians know that gratitude and grace go together.

And so we make a habit of looking for God's grace. For us, one way to combat distraction is *attraction*--to be attracted to something good that we want to be attracted to. That way, we replace the pointless worries in our mind with legitimate concerns that are worth thinking about.

Take as another example, *sleep*. Many of us worry about getting enough rest. We know that if we have a bad night, we can feel weary in the morning, and we don't want to be weighed down during the day with fatigue.

Now I think we can look at this worry from a spiritual point of view. First, we can trust God to get us through whatever we need to get through even if we aren't well-rested. Tired or not, God will help us to keep our eyes open and give us the strength we need to function.

Second, we can recognize that worrying about whether we'll sleep well makes it more likely that we will sleep badly! How many times we lie awake agonizing about lying awake!

In such situations, the best thing we can do is to say some prayers in the hope that we'll eventually drift off to sleep. Our distracting worries are replaced by the attraction of God's peace.

And speaking of prayer, there is a traditional blessing that is sometimes said before meals that actually mentions mindfulness. The blessing asks God to “make us *ever-mindful* of the needs of others.”

Here we have a fine example of Christian mindfulness. This attitude strives not only for inner focus our own souls but also encourages us to attend to other people and their needs.

Now I realize that *evermindful*, we're probably *not*! But mindfulness at whatever times we can manage it is worth striving for.

I say this as someone who is easily distracted. It sometimes seems to me that my mind seems to have a wandering life of its own!

On these occasions, especially, I need to rely on God's Spirit to gently bring me back to what's important. Then, at least sometimes, I can be alert!

And now unto that same God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.