

When you see a fig tree sprouting leaves—you know summer is near. And when you see people pushing and shoving to get into Walmart on the Friday after Thanksgiving, you know Advent is near.

Well now we're just past Thanksgiving, and the leaves of Christmas are not only budding—they're screaming at us--- 25 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS are now being beamed into our houses from the networks and cable stations. Red, white, green and silver & gold are everywhere! So called Christmas carols are blaring in stores, on the radio, and you can't even get away from it in some parking lots. I don't exactly know what Santa's ho-ho-ing and holly jolly Christmas' have to do with Christ --but clearly this speaks to many

But I don't need another Hallmark Christmas "special" and I'm never buying Gwen a Mercedes for Christmas no matter how big a bow they put on it.

Aren't we all a bit done with this televised emotional manipulation? I want my Advent to take me down a different path this year.

*"Show me your ways, O LORD, *
and teach me your paths."says the Psalmist this morning.*

Paths. Since God is everywhere, there are many paths that could work. We could begin by looking for a road or track laid down by many feet. Or we could choose a less known path, or even one where we break new ground.

It reminds me of the prophet Jeremiah's advice:

"Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths."

Throughout our lives we've been given options: paths which lead to this future or that outcome.

Do you remember the many different paths opening up to you in your lives-- with the choice entirely yours?

I remember several in my life --my choice decades ago to go to New York City instead of staying in Maine. Later, another choice: should I stay in theatre or take up youth work? Think back and you'll probably realize that even the small decisions in your lives changed them forever.

Have you ever wondered what would have happened, how your life would have been different if you'd chosen a different path? I'm pretty sure we all do.

It's probably a good thing that we are never shown what would have happened. But we do know that whatever choice we made, God journeyed with us.

But when these choices present themselves to us—how do we make our decision? What drives us one way or the other.

When we look at our lives as a series of paths to walk, choices to make, crossroads which made us stop and look—how did we choose? How do we choose now?

Sometimes we look for the way that is the most productive and will bring us the largest monetary gain. Sometimes we look for a challenge. Sometimes we are driven by what our friends and colleagues will think of us. Sometimes we make choices based on what is the least risky. And these are all valid choices.

But. How many times have we looked for the way that will bring us delight? I'm willing to bet that is not the motivating factor in most of us. To "selfish" we tell ourselves. But it does beg the question: what does delight us? Do we even really know? And why wouldn't God want us to choose something that delights us? Wouldn't that also delight God?

I was talking with a parishioner this week about scripture, and interesting things we've learned from teaching scripture—which took us down a long and circuitous path—and we got to talking about the word in our scriptures to describe God.

Most of the words for God have their genesis in a short word: El. We find many variations of this word since the writers of scripture came from many parts of the world—but the root is the same. In some places God is called El, in other places as Elohim. Some people write about El-shaddai, others Eli, or Eloi—but always the same root word: El.

What's even more fascinating is what El means. The word derives from "strong" or "leads from the front". But if you go back a little further in the language, the original meaning of El is closer to "the end of all human seeking", or "the goal for which humanity seeks."

What do we seek? Safety and security? Or something that makes our heart beat a little faster... Each is valid, and every Advent we have a choice.

"Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths."

What ARE the ancient paths?

I don't know, perhaps part of our lives comes in answering that very question. I can only give you what I am still trying to puzzle out—with God's help.

I have come to believe that the ancient paths lead us to what's more *real*—more *true* than much what we usually experience. And I want that life. I can only name it in metaphor—so here goes: It's the difference between breathing in the scent of a grove of fir trees in the winter, versus breathing in a balsam air freshener.

You know what I mean?

Sometimes I just get the feeling we settle for an air freshener world, when there's a grove calling.

So what are the ancient paths? The paths with no substitute. The path to look for this Advent.

God is calling, urging us not to settle for the imitation.

Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths: this is where delight is found. Amen.