

**The Straight Dope(amine)
First Sunday of Advent
Luke 21.25-31**

Deprive a laboratory mouse of its dopamine receptors and it will starve to death while a full bowl of food sits on the other side of its cage. The little brute will eat if you drop the pellets right into its mouth like a sultan noshing on grapes hand-fed by harem girls, but actually scampering a few inches to feed itself seems like too much trouble.

Dopamine, researchers say, is more personal trainer than cruise director. Turns out this tiny neo-Nazi-neurotransmitter is more stick than carrot, more about persistence than pleasure. It performs a triple-threat of survival-related tasks: it motivates us to do things that promote survival, it focuses our attention on what is new or different, and it alerts us to what is old and good.

Head to work when bed feels better? Dopamine got you going. Notice, on a rush-hour freeway, the one car coming at you the wrong way? Dopamine sent up the flare. Catch sight of the last chocolate doughnut left in the break room? Dopamine remembered that it's your favorite.

Similarly misunderstood, Advent is the dopamine season of the church year. During these few days we focus on the need to seek Christ's presence. After the long slog of ordinary time, Advent reminds us that something new has indeed happened under the sun. In the sensory overload of everyday life, Advent alerts us once again to the sweetness of our Savior's incarnation.

In his Olivet discourse, Jesus warned the disciples of a pretty thin time ahead: fake messiahs, real persecutions, and military upheaval in God's own city. The danger here lies in dopamine-deprivation. After the sixty-seventh second coming Christians could lose hope that Christ will ever come again. Weary rounds of persecution could drive us, not to defect but simply

to despair. The war-stench of another Middle Eastern military mess could dull our senses to the scent of the Prince of Peace.

Notice the resource Our Lord offers for times like this: "straighten up and lift up your heads." Now that's a dopamine verse for you, a drill sergeant text that shouts, "Shoulders back, chin up, suck in that gut!" When the circle of life seems to swirl around a sucking shower drain Advent is the dopamine season that orders us to hope – to survive, to see the new thing that God is always doing and to affirm the good He did long ago. Advent insists that we recall Paul's cry to the Romans that "now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed" (Romans 13.11).

The Christian calendar is a cycle, but not a circle. Its upward spiral reminds us that each page off the calendar brings us one day closer to the time when time shall be no more. Tired out? Worn down? Looking for one good reason to take one more step? Open your heart to Advent: Remember that Christ has come; remember that Christ is coming. Remember, and take one more step into eternity.

Don't be a Dope,

Doug