

Signs of the Times

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Luke 21:25-31(32-36)

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

1st Sunday in Advent

Movement 1 – The Signs of the Season

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. We see the candy canes and the silver lanes aglow. It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. We see the wreaths and the lights, the nativity scenes and the snowflakes. We see ornaments, decoration, evergreen trees and embellishments on storefronts, and we can see that it is beginning to look a lot like Christmas. These are signs, signs of the times. The ornaments are a sign that traffic will be worse, that sales will continue to entice the buyer, that commercials will continue to have a Christmas tenor, and that holiday sweaters will be worn. These ornaments and decorations are signs that homes on the streets will once again enter into a decorative light competition, that homeowners will mutter and curse under their breath as lights are unraveled and hung searching for that tasteful, and not too gaudy display. It is the time that parents will begin to rack their brain for the perfect, but not lavish gift to assure that their children will still love them for another year. It is a time of telling stories of a man climbing down the chimney to leave presents (or to take presents, if you're the Grinch). It is a time to be a little nicer to others. It is a time to sing carols, to don the hues of green and red, and to share as much cheer as possible. These are the signs of the time, it is beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

A good friend of mine told me that New York City is the best place to go this time of year. He claims that the lights, the tree, and the whole ambiance of New York City are almost magical. These holiday signs are powerful signs! These are signs that take a gritty, harsh, in-your-face kind of city, and make it into a holly, jolly, happy, dancing Christmas wonderland. These are signs that take any hurt, any grit, and ugliness and gloss over them with cheer and charity. These signs of glitz and glam are indeed the signs of the time. It is beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

The church takes a back seat to the sales, the presents, the decorations (to a degree) and to the carols. “Joy to the World” is nice, but Bing Crosby, Jonny Mathis, and Isaac Berlin have offered much more exciting songs to listen to and enjoy. The signs of the culture have even taken over the church when we adorn the church, not only with the mournful and penitential colors of purple, or the Hebraic royal color of blue, but with tress and wreaths, and Christmas cheer with cover the halls. Yes, when we should be saying that it is beginning to look a lot like Advent, we are already saying that it is beginning to look a lot like Christmas. The skeptic and philosopher Don Cupitt has described Christmas as the “Disneyfication of Christianity.” It is a time in a culture that has such a strong pull, that it is difficult to avoid. It is a time without confrontation and conflict, it is a time of joy, it is a time of surface hope and peace. We have been given the world's signs of the times, and it is beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

Movement 2 – The Signs of the Presence of God

Yet Christ does not give us such signs of Christmas cheer. In the gospel passage for today, we don't hear of signs of happiness, or joy, or peace, or love. We don't hear about candy canes, or tree lights, or presents, or that magical, wonderful feeling that can change whole cities into a winter-wonderland. Sure, Christ talks about signs, but these are different signs, with a different focus. Imagine that we are having a Christmas party, here at this church. Image we are all gathered drinking our Egg Nog (non-alcoholic for the Baptists), eating our cookies, sharing cards and presents, singing carols around the piano, and having just a great time. And then, in comes Jesus, and we are thrilled. “We have been waiting for you, Jesus.” Yet Jesus does not greet us with a

smile. Jesus does not greet us with cheer or laughter, but with a determined look on his face. Jesus looks at us, and tells us to watch for the signs. We are told to look for signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and distress among nations, and the roaring of the sea and the waves. We are told to look for a wash of chaos rushing over all the land, sending people into confusion and anxiety. We are told to look for signs that will take our breath away, and not in the same way as lighting a Christmas tree. If we were to read just a little before this passage, we would hear Christ foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and then he turns to these signs of cosmic upheaval. These are not happy, feel-good kind of signs. These are not the kind of signs that one looks forward to, that one sends out cards to celebrate, or exchanges presents. You can imagine the awkward feeling that would fall in the room. You can imagine people looking at the floor, shuffling their feet, and waiting for this moment to pass. Christ gives us different signs than the ones we tend to embrace this time of year. The scholar, Fred Craddock describes these signs as ones which upset all of creation, moments of cosmic upheaval. Christ gives us different signs.

It is almost as if we feel like we are being called to stand alongside people like Pat Robinson (who you may remember told the town of Dover, PA that God would very likely bring havoc upon them because they decided to teach that God-forsaken, science-backed, common-sense embracing evolution in the school), Jerry Farwell (who really believes that gays are indeed trying to break up heterosexual marriages), John Hagee (who believes that with the state of Israel will come the return of Christ), and James Dobson (who believed he heard a stem-cell sing “Jesus loves me”). These are some of the characters who we may think of when we think about these doom and gloom kinds of signs. These and others are usually the ones whom we assume will not hold back from preaching these images of violent rapture and tribulation. The funny thing is that if we truly were to look to stand by them, at this time of year, we would most likely find them embracing the cultural, the worldly signs of Christmas. We would find these evangelicals in churches covered with lights, making space for the tallest tree, and all would most likely be wearing their finest Christmas sweaters. Yet Christ does not call us to those signs.

At this time when we prepare for the return of Christ, when we prepare for the birth of Christ, we turn to the gospel and look for a sign of hope, of peace and of joy. Yet today, through the Word, Christ gives us different signs of hurt, of confusion and of chaos. Christ does not give us the signs of Christmas cheer.

Movement 3 – The Tension in the Signs

We are faced with a dissonance between the Advent, the expectant signs of Christ, and the worldly Christmas, hopeful signs of the world. We are given signs of trouble and signs of joy. We are given signs of chaos and signs of peace. We are given signs of pain and signs of hope. We hold these two camps of signs in our hands with a severe feeling of cognitive dissonance; the two just don't go together. Like singing opera at a folk music coffee house, or like playing chess in the middle of the Link auditorium just before an Eagles game, or like inviting a Baptist to preach in an Episcopalian service, the two signs do not go well together. And be honest with me, would you rather not follow the signs of the world? Would you rather follow the happy, holly, jolly signs? We save our sorrow for Lent not for Advent. This is supposed to be an exciting time, a joyful time, a hopeful and expectant time. Yet we are given a clash of colors, we are given two roads from which to choose with very little middle ground.

It reminds me of the prophet Micaiah in 1 Kings 22. The kings of Judah and Israel decided to go to war together, and looked to hear a word from the Lord before they went. Four hundred prophets said, “yes, yes, go to war, you will be in God's favor.” Micaiah was the sole prophet who preached disaster for the kings. Two different signs going in two different directions were before the kings of Judah and Israel, and are before us today. So which way will we go? With which signs shall we adorn our halls, our doors, our sense of expectation as we enter into this time of Advent? Remember the poem by Robert Frost, we find two roads diverged into the

woods, and you know which one is less traveled. We are faced with the two roads, we are faced with the dissonance, which road will you take?

Movement 4 – Embracing the Horrors of the World

My brothers and sisters of Redeemer Church, let me call you, challenge you, and encourage you to take the road less traveled. Let me challenge you to embrace the signs of cosmic upheaval, those moments when what is not right with the world truly stands out, those moment when God’s children are especially crying out for help. Look for the signs that Christ is calling us to see. Just like a tree, loosing its leaves, or sprouting green leaves, the signs of where Christ will be present will be obvious. Not in the comfortable. Not in the complacent, but in the crying, the weeping, and the lost will Christ be found. Especially in this time of Advent, especially in this time when we are waiting with anticipation to find the child and the savior Christ, look to the signs of cosmic upheaval.

Look to the continued lack of housing in New Orleans and surrounding areas caused by a hurricane that occurred a year ago, and sustained by powers and principalities which care not for God’s children. Look to the rising violence that we face here in Philadelphia and the culture that encourages it. Look to the chaos, the violence and the destruction that surrounds Iraq, Philistine, and the whole area of the Middle East, and the hate that fuels it. Look to the growing AIDS crisis that has destroyed the lives of so many people all around the world and the fear that avoids it. Look to the children who live without the basic necessities of food, shelter, and education and a society that turns its eyes away from the needs. Look to those who are living without a home, those who are living without food, and those who are living without hope. Look to the hungry, the sick, the naked, and those in prison. Look to hatred, look to violence, look to oppression, look to despair, and you will be truly looking at moments of cosmic upheaval, you will be looking at the signs that Christ is calling us to heed. We adorn our world with niceties, with pretty things, with gingersnaps and puppy dogs, but a hungry child holding an ornament of a red-nosed reindeer and wearing a Santa hat is still a hungry child.

My brothers and sisters, I am calling you to take the difficult stance, and look directly at the portents in the sky, and the moments of cosmic upheaval, at the despair of the world. This is a difficult challenge, it is an uncomfortable challenge, but it is a challenge that Christ, through the Word is calling us to embrace. Embrace the signs of distress, of despair, and of cosmic upheaval.

Movement 5 – Remembering Christ in our Response

Yet hold to the promise of Christ. Remember who Christ was, remember what Christ did, and remember what Christ has promised. This is a powerful memory; it is a holy memory that will carry you through the moment of cosmic upheaval to heavenly glory. In the gospel reading, Christ calls his followers, and all those around him to stand up, raise their heads, and promises to his followers that in these moments of distress, redemption is drawing near. These are not moments of distress for us, but moments of salvation and glory; this is indeed a promise of hope and assurance. Look further at the hope that Christ gives us through his further words and actions. When Christ lived, died, and rose again, we were given a concrete moment of hope in time that would transcend time. The theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg calls us to embrace this memory, this historic act, as a prolepsis of hope. It is an action of the past that gives us hope in the now and in the future. When we witness Christ breaking the boundaries of fear, breaking down the barriers of sickness, breaking the chains of societal oppression, breaking even the grasp of death and giving us life that goes beyond death, we are given a hope to carry us into tomorrow. That is the memory that is the promise that is the hope upon which we walk tall and sure into the moment of cosmic upheaval.

When we face the despair, as Kierkegaard claims, it can lead to death, or we can rest and trust in God, and it can lead to life. This is the hope I am offering to you, that I am giving to you as I challenge you to walk straight into the chaos and the sorrow. Walk with that memory and that hope that Christ can bring redemption

into suffering. Walk with that promise and that trust that Christ can bring grace into chaos. Walk with the knowledge and the peace that Christ can use you and even me to redeem the signs of the times.

I know of a church that looked at the cosmic upheaval of AIDS in the world. I know of a church that faced the despairing waves of death, of orphans, of brokenness and of loss, and chose to stand up in that moment of chaos and cosmic upheaval. I know of a church that decided to stand tall and look for, and claim, and demand that the redemption of the Lord would be known one country at a time, one child at a time, and one moment at a time. You have gone, you have supported, you have invested in the suffering of AIDS victims in Malawi and you have not turned away from the sing of the time.

I know of a church that looks at the cosmic upheaval of homeless. They saw the despair of children suffering, of mothers trying to find enough for at least one more meal, of fathers trying to find a job to be supportive, of bellies aching and living day to day without hope. I know of a church that looked this despair, which looked at this sign of cosmic upheaval in the face, and stood tall, and claimed, and demanded that the redemption of the Lord be known one family, one week at a time. Through the Interfaith Hospitality Network you have given hope, you have offered substance, you have been the hands and feet of Christ for those who so desperately need him.

In the chaos of your life, Christ will give you hope. In the chaos of the world, Christ will give you hope. Death has been beaten, despair has been beaten, and hope will prevail! Christ has promised to be with us, Christ has promised redemption to his followers even as the sun and the moon and the stars fall and the earth is in chaos. Hold to that promise, hold to the hope of who Christ is when you stand up and walk directly into the whirling chaos of the world.

Movement 6 – Claiming Hope in the Signs

Let us claim and name the true hope that can only be found in the signs of despair. Look not to the signs of the world, the paper covering, the glitz and the gloss that cover the suffering and the despair. Look instead to the manger and the cross. Look to the light that is to come into the world of darkness and of despair. We are waiting for the return of Christ. We are waiting for the birth of Christ. We will find it not in the glory of the world. We will find Christ not in the surface signs of the world, but in the darkness, in the despair, in those moments of cosmic upheaval, there we will find the true sign of hope, there we will find the true sign of peace, there we will find the true sign of Christ. The hope promised will be a hope received and a hope lived. Look for the signs of destruction, of hardship and find the signs of Christ. Look for the suffering of the Cross and find the sign of life, for only in the shadow of the Cross will the light of Christ truly shine.

My brothers and sisters, in this Advent season, let us wait for the sign that Christ has come. Let us wait with the anticipation that Christ's presence is promised. Let us wait looking for Christ, daring to go into the darkness, the despair and the gloom, and there we will find the baby and the redeemer. There we will find the hope promised, the hope yet to be, the hope that always was and is and shall be. There we will find our redemption, our Christ.

AMEN