
It's beginning to look a lot like...?

Luke 21:25-36

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on November 29, 2015

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On Monday, I climbed into my car in the morning to head to work where my primary task for the day was to work on this sermon. As I turned the key and started the engine, the radio cranked on. And there I was confronted again with the reality of our world. No, it was not the news of the most horrific happenings of the world. It was something disturbing, but not that. A song. "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, everywhere you go." It's beginning to look a lot like what? Immediately I called Renee who had been driving my car and who was also on her way to work to say, "It is not beginning to look a lot like Christmas." You may call me a Scrooge (Renee often does), but I don't want to think that it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas before Thanksgiving or before All Hallows Eve or before Labor Day or before the middle of the summer.

But as I looked around and thought about it, I decided it really is beginning to look like the shopping/consumer season we call Christmas. Starbucks has its cups. Stores have their wreathes, bows, and sales. The radio has its music. The TROSA tree stands are up, and there is even a nip in the air. The signs are obvious. It is beginning to look a lot like "Christmas." I can read these signs. Can't you?

In our gospel lesson today, we're confronted with the question of "What is it beginning to look like?" The crowds following Jesus and listening to his teachings are very interested in seeing and understanding signs of what is to come. People in Luke's Gospel have been looking for signs throughout Jesus' ministry. At one point, in the midst of Jesus' ministry of healing and proclaiming the kingdom, he grew weary of their asking and said, "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation." Jesus essentially said, "I'm the sign you will get. I'm enough." But the crowds following Jesus are here again asking for signs of what is to come. "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" "What's it beginning to look like, Jesus?"

Jesus has just been prophesying about the destruction of the temple—the location of God's presence and encounter with the people—and telling of the occupation of Jerusalem. This was religious/social/political, whole life changing stuff that Jesus was saying. It sounded like chaos. "It's beginning to look a lot like chaos" doesn't quite have the ring to it, but that is what the people must have been hearing, and they want to know for what to watch, so they can be ready. In the passage before ours today, Jesus offered some pretty basic signs—as basic as the signs that show us the "Christmas Shopping Season" has arrived. He said, "When there is a huge army surrounding Jerusalem, well, know that destruction is coming! Get out! Don't think God's going to save the city... these are the days of God's vengeance. Run to the mountains, flee to the country. Big army=Big sign."

But this end of the temple and the destruction of the city is not all there is to see coming. For the people listening to Jesus, for the early church, and for us, there is in fact life after the destruction of the city. So Jesus continues with his teaching about the signs. “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations... People will faint with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the whole inhabited world.” If the chaos of the city isn’t enough, what about when the whole cosmos, the heavens and the inhabited earth start being turned on their heads? These are dramatic signs, not ones that will be missed easily. And these, Jesus says, are the signs that indicate redemption and the kingdom of God are near.

This is a strange proclamation from Jesus. I get that the natural world has very clear signs. The leaves spring out of the branches; we know summer is coming. The leaves change color and start to fall; we know winter is on its way. We see candy canes, and silver lanes, and we know the “Christmas Shopping Season” has begun. One thing follows another. The present almost produces the future as a natural outgrowth. But these signs—heaven shaking, fear and foreboding, distress and confusion among the peoples of the world, roaring of the waves and seas... these surely are not the signs that speak to redemption. These are not signs that speak to God’s presence. These are not signs that naturally grow into God’s Kingdom—that is, God’s reign and rule in the world. These are not... are they? It’s beginning to look a lot like what, Jesus?

We see signs like these around us today. Cosmic and cataclysmic signs, world altering signs abound around us. We open our eyes, peer around, and see signs in the natural world—rising sea levels, ozone depletion, rain forest deforestation, scarcity of potable water, extinction of entire eco-systems, top-soil depletion, dead-zones at river deltas—and these are just a few. And look at the nations! War and conflict are more abundant than food and water for many. The world is rife with humanitarian disasters, refugee crises, and political distress. Let me just name a few cities and countries where in recent days violence has been the bread of the people: Beirut, Paris, Palestine, Israel, Nigeria, Iran, Syria... and we’re only getting started. And let’s get closer to home to name some of the turmoil of our country—where for too long black lives have not mattered—where for too long health, education, and economic disparities have negatively trended disproportionately along racial lines. Distress and confusion have us all running to our political corners, hunkering down into our ideological encampments, feeling faint from fear and foreboding of what could possibly be coming. All that has been in power—even the heavens themselves—seems to be shaking all around. And I haven’t even started naming the personal and interpersonal signs that are devastatingly distressing and colossally confusing. And these are the signs of what? It’s beginning to look a lot like what, Jesus?

Jesus words to the crowds of the gospel of Luke ring out to us today on this first Sunday of Advent—the season we watch, wait, and long for the coming of the Lord, even as we remember Jesus’ first coming at Christmas. “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near... When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near... Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Jesus said to those listening and he says to us, “Just as you expect summer to come when you see leaves blossoming, expect to see me when the world is on fire, when people and relationships are unraveling, when all heaven and earth are in chaos. Expect me! I am trustworthy and true. When fear and foreboding cloud the horizon and overwhelm your present, expect me! I

am trustworthy and true. When nations are warring, and the oppressed are moaning, and those needing refuge are as numerous as the stars, expect me! I am trustworthy and true. This is no time to duck and cover. This is time to stand up, raise your head, get to a good observing place, be on the lookout because you can expect me!”

Really this shouldn't be a surprise to us. If we've paid attention, this is consistent with Jesus' life and ministry throughout the Gospel story Luke tells. Let me remind you of the signs. The sign is a young virgin girl engaged to be married. Expect Jesus! “Don not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” The signs are 5 loaves and 2 fish and more than 5000 people. Expect Jesus! And he took the food, blessed and broke it and gave it to crowds, and there were 12 baskets of broken pieces left over. The signs are a woman with an incurable bleeding disease that no physician can heal and a 12-year-old girl who has died in bed. Expect Jesus! “Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace.” Expect Jesus! “Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved... Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping.” The sign is a too long, dead man buried in a tomb. Expect Jesus! “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”

From the beginning to the end, Jesus teaches us to read the signs differently because the breaking in of God's kingdom does not come as “the predictable outcome of present trends” (James F. Kay). God's future irrupts and interrupts the steady flow from past to present to future where the past and present determine the possibilities of the future. Jesus' redemption for oppressed and oppressors, for saints and sinners, for the faithful and the fools comes when those without eyes to see only expect death and hell and chaos and pain. We read the signs and say, “It's beginning to look a lot like redemption time.” “It's beginning to look a lot like the Kingdom of God is coming near.”

But let me caution us here. Jesus doesn't ask us to ignore reality, to put our heads in the sand or in the clouds, or to withdraw from witnessing the horrors and terrors of our world. In fact, Jesus expects us to look directly at the signs — “So also, when you see these things...” Jesus invites us into a dramatic wrangling with the reality of our broken world. Jesus invites us to expect a future that matters to the concrete realities of the present but that is not bound by the possibilities contained within the present.

The overwhelming thrust of our culture will insist that we celebrate Christmas for the next 27 days. And why not? Christmas is about fulfilment of expectation and promise. Christmas is about God being with us. But I want us to live in the wisdom of the Christian calendar that begins our new year with Advent. Advent is about waiting, longing, expectation, hope, the not-yet fulfilled, that which is to come, patience, long suffering, and preparation. Advent is about watching for the small and momentary in-breakings of God's Kingdom now. And ultimately, Advent is about watching and waiting for the full breaking in of God's future when Jesus returns in glory and heaven and earth are made new. And though it is not Christmas, the Advent season of waiting is filled with joy, hope, peace, and love right in the middle of chaos and calamity, fear and foreboding, wailing and worry.

When Renee was pregnant with Nolan, I regularly had a recurring dream. You see, I had exactly one job that I was responsible for in the whole birthing process. I was responsible for packing the “go bag”—that all important bag filled with clothes and other things to make a laboring woman or a new mother a little more comfortable at the hospital, which I think has a primary purpose of making husbands feel like we are contributing to the process. In my dream, Renee would start laboring, it would be time for us to go to the hospital, and to my horror, every time I had failed to pack the bag. In my dream, I had waited on this birth that was inevitably coming, but I had done none of the preparing during that waiting. Don’t worry, I packed the “go bag.”

The waiting of Advent is unlike the passive waiting of my recurring dream. The waiting of Advent is active, heads up, alert waiting. Christ will sure enough be coming, but what kind of waiting will we do? Let’s listen to the waiting to which Jesus calls his followers in our Gospel passage. Jesus says, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.” Jesus says, be on guard, things may get heavy for you. Jesus says, pay attention because you may be tempted by wasteful living, overindulgence, addiction to the things that numb your heart and mind. Jesus says, beware you may be tempted by distraction and loss of focus on the important things. Watch out, you may be tempted by being overwhelmed with the concerns of your daily lives and all that makes life seem good. In your waiting, be on guard because if you fail to watch yourself in these ways, you just might not be ready for the kingdom coming. Be vigilant about the life distractions that creep in and make you forget to watch for the Lord. In all your self-distractions and self pleasing, in all your worry and concern connected to life as you know it, you may be caught off guard, shocked and unprepared for participation in God’s future kingdom. Be on guard!

Jesus gives another pair of instructions about how we are to wait. “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place.” Be alert and pray. By being alert, we are able to see and understand the signs. We are not to look away from our broken world, from the hurt and pain and trouble. Instead we are to be alerted to it. See and comprehend the depths of the brokenness and pray for strength, for rescue, for escape, for the coming of the Son of Man. Pray the prayer of Revelation, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Pray for Jesus to disrupt our pain-filled, hurting, oppressive and damning world with his presence. Be alert and pray.

As Advent people, we learn to wait on the coming of the Lord. As Advent people, we watch and wait and testify to the coming Kingdom that judges injustice and hatred and redeems with love and peace. As Advent people, we come to know that the signs of death and destruction, the signs that cause fear and foreboding, are only for us indications that Jesus is near and God’s kingdom of Shalom is still coming. So in this season of Advent, may we watch and wait trusting in the One for whose coming we hope and pray. May we ever be a people who read the signs and proclaim in hope, “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christ’s coming.” Amen.