

Signs

Preached FCCW, December 2, 2018 (Advent 1C)

Luke 21:25-36

Jesus once told a parable about signs.

He said. "Look at a fig tree. As soon as it sprouts leaves you know it is a sign that a change of seasons is just around the corner."

With the season of Advent, comes the many signs that Christmas is coming soon. There are signs in homes and public places, in the form of Christmas trees and bright lights. Even Black Friday doorbusters and Cyber Monday sales are signs of the season in their own way.

Advent literally means "arrival" and our sanctuary is appropriately adorned with these familiar signs to remind of us of the approaching celebration of our Savior's birth. But Advent is not just about mangers, stables, angels and shepherds setting the scene for the arrival of baby Jesus. It is also about a "second advent." The second arrival, or Second Coming of Jesus.

Jesus said there would be signs to set the stage for the Second Advent. But not the kinds of signs that hang on trees or shine from wreath bound candles. Jesus spoke of "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars." Signs in the roaring of the sea and waves. Signs of change that would stir up distress among nations. "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. When you see these things take place," he said, "you know that the kingdom of God is near. Stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near." But, the signs Jesus describes sound more like the kinds of things that would make you want to duck and run, than stand up and raise your head and cheer.

What with the exceptional ferocity of hurricanes, floods, wildfires and earthquakes we've been witnessing lately; and growing worries about the irreversibility of climate change, it would hardly be surprising if people began to wonder if we are not approaching the End of Days that Jesus was predicting the world would see.

Sue and I used to have a refrigerator magnet that said, "Don't make me come down there." Signed God. It's funny -- but it's also true -- that most people think of the Second Advent that way. That the Second Coming is waiting until immorality and evil have evolved into such an unstoppable juggernaut, that a "Wait til your Father gets home" moment like the world has never seen will take place. The assumption is that Jesus' words about signs in the heavens and on the earth that would lead to fear and foreboding of what was coming on the world must mean that the Second Advent will be a violent, cataclysmic event.

That's not necessarily what he meant. There are two Greek words for "world" that Jesus could have used in this passage. One of them refers to the natural world of God's creation. That word is Kosmos. It's not the word Jesus uses here. The word Jesus uses is one that refers more specifically to the world of political and economic powers that exert their dominance in the world and resist God's will for humanity. It is the "world" in that sense that Jesus said will be in fear and turmoil when he returns.

For the kingdom of God to come near, that which stands in its way must first be removed. For righteousness, peace and justice to take root and spread its leaves, the greed, hatred, and inequality must be weeded out. For the institutions and instruments of injustice that will feel as though the world is coming to an end.

Jesus isn't describing literal natural disasters when he talks about signs in the heavens and upheavals on the earth. He is foretelling the collapse of the infrastructure that has propped up and permitted poverty for some and privilege for others to exist throughout human history.

Jesus speaks about two groups of people in this passage, and how each group will react differently to the signs of his return. The first group is the worldly powers that be. He says "they" will react in fear and foreboding. The other group he addresses more intimately and in the second person. He says, "When *you* see these things taking place, *you* know that the kingdom of God is near."

Who is the "you" he is talking to? He is talking to his disciples. Those who would become his Church.

He is talking to us.

Since the time of the First Advent, when Jesus arrived among us in a Bethlehem stable, 'til the Second Advent, whenever that may be, the Church that Jesus planted, whenever it witnesses faithfully to the righteousness, peace and justice that God desires for all people, has served as a sign of what the Kingdom of God is like.

What if the Second Advent is not about an angry Jesus bringing the Kingdom of God on earth through a violent apocalyptic event, at all?

What if it is about the arrival of a season where evil's power has been eroded by the work and witness of the Church across the ages, and heads are lifted to see the redemption we have been waiting for?

Not only a redemption of the weak who have suffered at the hands of the mighty. But a redemption of the mighty, from the destructive illusions of their own power.

Advent traditionally begins with lighting a candle. A candle that signifies hope. Not only hope in Jesus who came to save us from ourselves. But, also hope in the Jesus who will return – not with a sword, but with an olive branch -- to finalize the coming near of God's Kingdom.

Between the two Advents, it is we who are called to be signs. Signs to the world of what humanity's destiny in God can be. The meditation by Frederick Beuchner on the bulletin cover may say it best:

"To wait for Christ is, as best we can, to be Christ to those who need us to be Christ to them most, and to bring them the most we have of Christ's healing and hope, because unless we bring it, it may never be brought at all."

