

“A TIME FOR SIGNS”

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

First Sunday in Advent (November 29), 2009

As we begin this Advent season, I want to share with you the theme that we'll be hearing about for the next few weeks. Using the first verse from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes – “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” – we are going to make this Advent season “A Time for Christmas.” Each week leading up to December 24, we're going to take time for something that will help us understand what we are celebrating.

If you are anything like me, you're already feeling the stress of the season. Today is a good indication of what this season can be like – moving at a breakneck pace from early morning until well into the evening. If we're not careful, we will spend all of our time being busy with preparations and doing, and not leave any time to consider what it is we are preparing for.

Today, the first Sunday in Advent, offers us a time to consider the signs that something great is in the works. The prophet Jeremiah says, “The days are surely coming,” and Jesus says in Luke, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars...” So what are these signs, and to what are they pointing?

Back in the 70's, there was a rock band, the 5 Man Electrical Band. Anyone ever heard of them? If you haven't, I can't blame you. I think they were what is known as a one-hit wonder. Their one hit was the song, “Signs.”

In the first few verses of the song, you hear a running commentary on the social situation in the US and Canada in the late 60's and early 70's. Discrimination and exclusionism are the main themes, which are summed up in the words of the refrain:

“Sign, sign, everywhere a sign,
Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind
Do this, don't do that. Can't you read the signs?”

“Can't you read the signs?”

Today's scripture readings are about the signs. They are about the promise God has made to us, the promise made when the Lord said, “The days are coming, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David, and he will execute righteousness in the Land.”

Stop for a minute with me and think about it.

What does it mean to us now, this promise of God? What does it mean when Jesus says to us that there is a day coming when the Son of Man will come to us in a cloud with power and great glory?

What do these signs mean now in the midst of a busy life, a life where our kids expect to be driven here and there and ask for things that we just can't afford? A life where our employers expect us to work overtime, and our lodge, our church, and our ball or hockey team ask for hours we don't have?

What do these signs about the future mean when we are caught up in trying to do all we can do right here and now in the present - what do they mean when we are struggling to live one day at a time - when we are trying to be all things to all to many people?

What do they mean when we watch the news or read the paper and discover that senseless horrors continue throughout the world; that crime and starvation and terrorism and war and earthquakes and floods abound and indeed seem to be increasing?

To me they mean that we should rejoice...and that we should stand up and watch and pray - pray that we might be able to escape the time of tribulation, and pray that we might be able to stand before The Son of Man when he comes.

These signs - these promises – are that the future is not going to be like the present. They are that those things that we see that are wrong in this world, those things that we hear of that are evil – will perish away, and that a new heaven and a new earth will come upon us – a heaven and earth of everlasting peace and justice, joy and love.

I think that is important.

And so does Jesus. That is why he talks about the future - that is why he mentions the signs of this coming, how the stars and the moon and the sun itself will appear to go off course and terror will be felt among the nations, and fear among the peoples.

And that is why he 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 catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Advent has just begun, yet we have experienced the hustle and the hurry for weeks or even months. What is it that you have been focused on most recently? Is it some kind of preparation of your home for an earthly visitor? Is it a question of whether you'll end this year in the black or the red financially? Is it concern over one of the big issues that is troubling our nation – the economy, health care, our military presence in the Middle East perhaps?

Jesus tells us in today's gospel reading not to be distracted by the big issues: warfare, floods, famine, creation seeming to fall apart. But rather to see them as signs of what is to take place.

But he is also telling us about the personal things that can be more distracting than any civil war halfway around the planet.

It's those personal events that are so dangerous, because they are subtle and sneaky. We don't realize what is happening until it is too late. All of a sudden we're trapped, feeling sorry for ourselves, working so hard, being so focused on one thing, that we miss the bigger picture.

That's why Jesus tells us to be alert. To watch. To not get so caught up in the everyday things or the big tragedies that we lose sight of the larger scheme, that we fail to look down the road, that we fail to see the signs of the Kingdom looming towards us with all its hope - all its promise.

The kingdom is coming. A righteous Branch has sprouted from David's line; and he will do what is just and right in the land. He has come - and he is returning. We are called to be ready for him when he does, to be praying and loving and doing the things he has commanded us to do.

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That is the attitude of Advent. Of being alert to what is going on around us. Of understanding what the signs around us are trying to tell us and readying ourselves for the fulfillment of God's word in our midst. Of readying ourselves by prayer. Of readying ourselves by having in us the holy hope that God wants us to have.

Jesus does not tell us about the signs of the end and the coming time of judgment to frighten us, but rather to assure us - to have us understand that God is keeping God's promise - and that the time of God's rule is at hand.

He tells us about the signs of the coming of the kingdom so that we might ready ourselves for it.

The last verse of the song "Signs" makes an abrupt shift in attitude. Instead of being excluded by the world, the writer tells of being included in at least one place - the church. And while he has no money to put into the offering plate, he writes his own little sign: "Thank you, Lord, for thinking about me. I'm alive and doing fine."

"Sign, sign, everywhere a sign." Look around. Take notice of the signs. And, with your head held up high, walk the road towards the approaching Kingdom in prayer and in hope, in righteousness and in love, knowing that as so many of promises of God were fulfilled at the birth of Christ, so too the rest will be fulfilled. And because of these promises, we're all alive and doing fine. **AMEN.**