

SERMONSECOND
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

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The Signs of the Times

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Luke 21:26-36

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The season of Advent is upon us, and with it is a spirit of heaviness. It is not the heaviness of Lent, when we are called to sacrifice and repentance, but there is a quality of darkness, nevertheless.

The music of the season shows it; much of it is cast in a minor key. It is the music of longing, hoping, and waiting: "*Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel. And ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here.*" The music and the mood are of an exile, far from a home never really known, but long and instinctively anticipated.

You and I may have some trouble with this mood—we already know the end of the story. We know that the "long-expected Jesus" has, indeed, come; and that we will soon be singing "Joy to the World!" Furthermore, we live in a culture where celebration is in the mood of the season and everyone seems to be occupied with shopping and party-going. It's difficult to take on the mood of mournful waiting—acting as if Jesus has not yet come when, of course, we know that he has come—when we are living on this side of the cross and Resurrection of Easter.

If that is correct, we can take particular pleasure in our gospel lesson this morning. It does not begin that way. To the contrary, the first impact of the passage is one that calls for mourning; it is a warning of coming judgment. A day is coming, Jesus said, when people will "faint with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world" -- a time of "distress among nations" as they struggle in perplexity with what is happening.

The normal reaction to such a scene is somewhere between despair and panic. We expect the populace to hide in terror, or at least to put in a frantic call to the psychiatrist. But Jesus has a better, happier word. "When these things begin to take place," our Lord said, "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." The unbelieving and the unknowing may cringe with fear, but the people of God should be prepared to shout. The events of such a time are the sound of judgment to secular society; but for believers they are the sound of deliverance.

Then Jesus spoke a one-sentence parable. Look at the fig tree, or any other tree, he said. "As soon as they sprout leaves, you know that summer is already near."

So it is that the people of God read the signs of the times. We are not blind to what is happening in our world, and surely we dare not be insensitive to it. But neither do we see the storm clouds as a reason for panic.

Mind you, there will be judgment. Judgment is necessary. Great preacher Henry Sloane Coffin, once said. "There is no more comforting text in the entire Bible than this, "Our God is a consuming fire." That's our best promise and also good evidence—even if painful—that God cares about our world. God loves our world, so God cleanses it. God loves it, and God's love shows itself, at times and by necessity, in the consuming fires of judgment.

However, judgment is not the end of the story!

Faith tells us that God's judgment is to a worthy end. In 1755, a series of natural and political disasters swept over Europe. The Seven Years' War broke out in June of that year, then poor harvests, and the Lisbon earthquake. A severe cattle plague devastated Western Europe. Many felt that perhaps the end of the world was at hand.

England called a National Fast Day for February 6, 1756, and Charles Wesley—co-founder with his brother John of the Methodist movement, and the most prolific hymn writer of Christian history—wrote 17 hymns for the occasion. These hymns are vigorous in their descriptions of the disasters which were then occurring. They portrayed these events as the acts of a "righteous God" who was baring his arm in judgment. But Wesley could write, and the people could sing,

*Whatever ill the world befall
A pledge of endless good we call,
A sign of Jesus near.*

There might indeed be disaster all around, but the Christian held to God's "pledge of endless good." Though plagues and war threatened, they were nothing more than "a sign of Jesus near."

It is not that we Christians are naive about life, or that we go about life in a kind of Pollyanna happiness, oblivious to the hard facts of a cruel world. It is just that we possess some other facts, most of which have not occurred to the secular world.

We start with the primary fact of God, and what we believe God's character to be. The secular world generally believes in God, but in a remote way. And what is worse, the world is inclined to see God as indifferent, at best, and vengeful, at worst.

Christians see God, through the eyes of Jesus, as a benevolent parent, who wills good for his children. Like any truly loving parent, God must work within the bounds of discipline and sometimes must reprove us. But God's purpose for us and for this world is always good. So we can say, as Charles Wesley did in 1756,

*The famine all thy fullness brings,
The plague presents thy healing wings.*

We believe, too, that God works purposefully in all that happens in our world. I don't believe everything that happens is the will of God. It isn't God's will that a drunk driver would kill an

entire family. It isn't God's will that children get cancer and die. I do believe that God is able to redeem even the worst of our rebellions and stupidities and to bring good out of them.

The secular mind looks at all the facts it can see and says, "Life is just one fool thing after another." The believer looks at the same facts, and adds one more: our belief in the character of God and God's purposes. With that strategic additional fact in place, we say, "Life is sometimes a confusing combination of circumstances, but God is working with us for good, to bring order out of it all." Paul reminds the church in Rome, "All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). God has a purpose for our world, and God works through creation and judgment to bring it to pass.

So Jesus looked at the signs of the times and promised that summer was on the way -- signs in the heavens, distress of nations, people fainting with fear and foreboding. He said, "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." All these signs, Jesus said, are like leaves bursting forth on a fig tree; when you see them, you know that "summer is already near."

This is a good word for our day. It's clear enough that the 24/7 news cycle world is a cause for fear and foreboding. The times are, indeed, frightening. But, at such a time, we offer some additional facts: God, God's character, God's purposes, God at work in history. And with it all we say, "Summer is near. Our Lord is at hand."

This is also a significant word for us as individuals. Most of our struggle is not of cosmic proportion, but, rather with the problems of our personal lives. These problems may be as wrenching as bereavement or major surgery, or as upsetting as a divorce or the loss of a job. More often they are those nameless, faceless feelings which seem to come upon us from the blind side, making us feel undone without our knowing why. An insensitive person might suggest that some of our upsets aren't big enough to matter; but, the fact is, when you hurt you hurt and no one from the outside is qualified to say it isn't so.

When we are in the midst of such personal turmoil, we need to remind ourselves that we are a summer people. We live in a world where God has chosen to manifest Godself through his Son, Jesus Christ. It is a world great with promise. We believe that God's purpose for our lives is good; and, though surrounding circumstances may be negative, we expect the good to win. Even in those instances when we ourselves are responsible for our troubles, we still dare to ask God's help in finding our way out.

It is because "all times are God's seasons" that Jesus could point to signs which seemed to speak of winter and insist that summer was drawing near. Our Lord is not controlled by the seasons of life; he is Lord of the seasons. He is not victim of our winter of discontent, for all times are his season. When the snow lies heavy on our lives, he can announce that summer is very near. And by trusting him, we can rise up to meet the challenge of the day.

"Stand up and raise your heads," Jesus said, "because your redemption is drawing near." Perhaps the music of Advent should have more of that quality -- the raised head and the upward look. The child who is on tiptoe in anticipation of Christmas may not be stirred by the highest motives. Yet that child may be closer to the mood of the season than the person who mourns about the hopelessness of our world. Our redemption is near!

A great Scottish preacher, Dr. George Morrison, often walked to a little village in the valley not far from Glasgow. Running into that village were the remains of a wall which the Romans built in the first century. Dr. Morrison said that he liked going there on a Saturday, to ponder that the wall was a strong, new thing when John was writing the Revelation; and, at that time, the church was a little, hunted thing, apparently on its way to extinction. (homileticsonline.com)

It is time to lift our heads and sing, for we are preparing again to celebrate the coming of our Lord. We have read the signs of the times and they tell us that summer is near. Whatever we pass through in route, and whatever we may be called upon to do in order to save our world, we know the end of the story.

We are believers in Jesus Christ, so we know that summer is near.

Sources:

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The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 1991.

R. Alan Culpepper, The Gospel of Luke, The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 1995.

The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.