

“Signs along the Way”
Advent 1c
Luke 21:25-36

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In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Our Gospel reading today is a particular kind of writing called apocalyptic. We have examples also in Mark and Luke. The book of Revelation is apocalyptic from beginning to end. Portions of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah from the Old Testament are as well. The word means revelation. Biblical apocalyptic reveals the back-story. It shows us what is going on under the surface. I have heard it defined as crisis literature. The crisis behind our gospel reading today is multi-layered. The first layer is from the time Jesus spoke these words to his disciples. The Roman occupation created a crisis for the whole Jewish people. For Jesus' followers the crisis was heightened by Jesus' talk of his death and resurrection. His words about the destruction of the temple, already a generation in the making and not yet finished, added to the sense of crisis.

The next layer of crisis was added on a few decades later at the time Luke wrote his gospel. In 72 A.D. the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the just-completed temple. Jesus' followers were being dragged before councils and governors as Jesus said they would be. And there were other events as well adding to a sense of crisis. The eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. snuffed out thousands of lives and obliterated cities. It sent a cloud of ash and debris into the atmosphere that muted the sun's rays over the Mediterranean basin for months. A Roman legion was mauled in a campaign in Parthia just east of Palestine, defeated and forced to withdraw. Nero, the mad emperor, who reportedly fiddled while Rome burned, was said to have come back to life and was at the head of a Parthian army set to invade. There you have signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, and the powers of the heavens shaken. Yet the community remembered and latched on to Jesus' words, “When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” Where did they get such confidence?

In Luther's time the looming crisis was the Turkish army poised at Vienna's gates. The sense of crisis was fed by the plague, which was known to kill up to 90% of the population of an affected area. And no one understood its comings and goings. Popular art from that time was

from the book of Revelation. The four horsemen of the apocalypse were a favorite. Judgment scenes abounded, depicting Christ the king separating people as a shepherd separates sheep from goat. Those on the right go off to paradise, those on the left to eternal judgment. Yet Luther famously replied to someone who asked him what he would do today if he knew the world was ending tomorrow, "I'd go ahead and plant my apple tree as planned." From where did he get such confidence?

In our own day the crisis is bred by economic meltdown, the collapse of housing prices, people without jobs, financial security pulled out from under us. It seems we just caught our breath from the cold war and reset the doomsday clock only to be faced with a nuclear-armed Iran and Pakistan as a loose nuclear cannon. There is workplace rage and rage in our schools and in the streets.

The first century had its story of Emperor Nero come back to life. We now have end-of-the-world scenarios connected with the year 2012. I thought 2012 was only a movie title but I learned big things are afoot for the calendar of the ancient Mayan people ends in 2012. I heard a NASA astrophysicist, Dr. David Morrison interviewed on a radio program. He answers questions from the public and most of his questions now are about signs in the sun, moon and stars leading to the world's end in 2012. There is way too much to go into here but one of them involves the rogue planet Nibiru, which is on a collision course with earth. Dr. Morrison answered, "There isn't such a planet any more than the planet Naboo from the Star Wars trilogy is real. Purported Internet pictures of the interloper are photographic lens flares or hoaxes." He said, "Don't believe every dot you see photographed in the sky."

These end-of-the-world calculations come along like clockwork. As soon as one recedes to the edge of memory another one arises. We had them in the early 1980s, again at Y2K, and now. Dr. Morrison makes clear that this is more than a distraction from real crises. He said, "I've had two teenagers who were considering killing themselves, because they didn't want to be around when the world ends. Two women in the last two weeks said they were contemplating killing their children and themselves so they wouldn't have to suffer through the end of the world." One of the purveyors of this 2012 crisis recommends that we meet it by "taking refuge in your own life." Is that where we are to find confidence for living?

Jesus' words seem to be mining the same vein of crises: signs in the sun, moon, and stars, distress among nations, people fainting from fear and foreboding. In the Old Testament Israel is twice described as a barren fig tree. In Jeremiah it comes in a section sub-titled "The blind perversity of the whole nation." In Micah the section is headed, "The total corruption of the people." Jesus' words so far and the witness of the Old Testament prepare us for words of judgment. I'm expecting a withered fig tree, uprooted and burned by the master of the orchard. Instead of the fires of judgment, Jesus tells us to "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." What makes for this confidence? Jesus tells us to look for signs of new life. He says, "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near." That is like telling us to go out now, late November with the last leaf swept from the gutter, and look for signs of summer. I studied the ground where the iris bulbs are planted by our front door. I saw some promising green shoots, but I'm not breaking out the shorts. I know what's coming for those green shoots and for us. I've got the winter gear at the ready. If the seasons are to be a metaphor for our situation, I'd say it is much more like what C.S. Lewis described in "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe." Lucy has stumbled from the back of the wardrobe into the Land of Narnia. She crunched snow underfoot. She met a talking faun who invited her to tea. Actually, he was kidnapping her for the White Witch. She told all her subjects, under penalty of being turned into stone, that if they ever come across a son of Adam or daughter of Eve they are to turn them over to her. "Why, it is she that has got all Narnia under her thumb," the faun explained to Lucy. "It's she that makes it always winter. Always winter and never Christmas; think of that!" Yet, Jesus tells us, in the midst of such a world, we are to look for signs of life.

Where? Where are we to look for such signs? Jesus says they will be obvious, as obvious as a leafing tree. Jesus is speaking to his disciples after his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. He is in the midst of the week we call holy. His betrayal, arrest and execution are hours away. In him God will die on the cross. What bigger crisis could there be? When Jesus died the sun refused to shine; the earth quaked; tombs tore open. The old foundations crumbled. From the midst of the rubble Jesus rose, the first born, the first green shoot, of a new creation. This is why those first century believers faced governors and councils with confidence. This is the promise under which Luther would carry on with his planting. It is the source of our courage.

Signs of new life begin in Jesus' resurrection. He is the righteous branch that Jeremiah promised in our first reading today. We are grafted into him at our baptism. So we look for signs of his resurrection life in one another.

Do you remember the role the lamp-post had in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*? It was a direction finder for those who lost their way. More than that, it had almost a mystic quality about it, indicating the providential and graceful workings of God behind the scenes. We look for such signs. I watched the video posted on our web site of our high school youth working two Saturdays ago at the food pantry in Lawndale and I saw a green shoot breaking through frozen ground. At that web site I saw a picture of some of our school students from grades 3-8 who last month teamed up with Professor Bill Duey and students at Concordia University to participate in Feed My Starving Children. Working in teams, they measured ingredients, weighed and sealed the bags, and packed completed meals into boxes to be shipped around the world. Participants in the event packed 100,872 meals! When I read that I know I caught a glimpse of yet another shoot breaking through the frost. In like manner we serve as signposts along the way for those who have lost their bearings in life. These green shoots leafing out bear witness to the day when Christ shall come and there will be no more war or sickness. No one will get lost. Every tear will be dried. Even so, come Lord Jesus.