

“Signs of the Times”

*A sermon preached on Luke 21:25-36 by Emily Hull McGee
on December 2, 2018 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

Since the beginning of civilization, there has been no shortage of people watching the signs of the times to predict the end of it all. A change of millennia, dates long held in Nostradamus’s watch, the conclusion of a calendar, a time of great volatility in the weather, the stock market, celebrities, politics... all moments where even the calmest among us wonder: *is this the end?*

Everyone copes with such wondering differently though, right? Some stockpile canned goods and candles; others hoard the vodka. Some share memes on social media, like the one I’ve seen recently on Instagram that shows a picture of a cartoon character, surveying herself in the mirror with the caption: “we really are sitting here on our phone scrolling on an app while we float through space on a dying rock.”¹ Some drive around with bumper stickers on their cars that say, ‘Warning: In case of the rapture, the driver of this car will disappear.’ Others respond with tongue firmly in cheek, ‘When the rapture comes, can I have your car?’²

Several years ago when the world reached December 21, 2012, known to apocalyptics as the end of the Mayan calendar, fear and anxiety and worry paralyzed those who were sure it meant all things would conclude. But one hung a lone sign a chain-link fence with a sentence scrawled in Spanish,

¹ With great gratitude to Ali Chappell DeHay for sharing this with me!

² As told by Barbara Brown Taylor in “On the Clouds of Heaven,” *The Seeds of Heaven*, p110.

which translated said this: “I am not afraid that the world will end in 2012. I am afraid it will stay the same.”³

II.

That’s where we begin, dear church, with an invitation to transformation on this First Sunday of the church year and the first Sunday of Advent. Every year, the lectionary texts that guide our worship insist on beginning with the end. Every year – Matthew, Mark, and for us this year, Luke – we start with Jesus’s words of prediction that herald the final coming of the Son of Man.

But without fail, every Advent I read these texts and my first instinct is the same. “Really?” I think to myself. “The Thanksgiving leftovers have barely run out, the holly jolly season of Christmas has thundered in everywhere, the house needs decorating, the cards need sending, the eggnog needs enjoying, the year-end sales and new year’s resolutions lie just around the corner... and **this** is a moment for “signs in the sun, moon, and stars; distress among nations; fear and forboding calls for sober strength”? Not exactly ‘fa la la la la’, right?

Today’s lectionary passage is the final part of what scholars call Luke’s ‘apocalyptic discourse’ in chapter 21, ‘apocalyptic’ coming from the word ‘apocalypse’ which means ‘revelation.’ Here as in other apocalyptic texts in scripture (Isaiah, Daniel, Revelation), history is being situated within God’s larger purpose with language and scenes and places and images that are part-startling, part-familiar.⁴ American novelist Flannery O’Connor once

³ Story told by Susan K. Olson, “Luke 21:20-28,” *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke*, vol. 2, p237-241.

⁴ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Series, p243.

wrote, “To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures.”⁵ So to all of us throughout all generations — hard of hearing and almost blind, by our very nature or by our own stubbornness — Jesus does just that. “There will be signs,” he says, “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 will faint from fear and forboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

Advent is the season where we pay attention to the signs, looking back to the first coming of God made flesh, looking ahead to the final coming of the Son of Man, and looking around in the in-between. In that season between beginning and end, Advent invites us to watch and wait, to prepare and yearn. Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of Advent’s invitation to “live a caught-up life, not a put-off life, so that wherever you are — standing in a field or grinding at the mill, or just going about the everyday business of your life — you are ready for God, for whatever happens next, not afraid but wide awake, watching for the Lord who never tires of coming to the world.”⁶ And within our preparation and waiting, God makes clear the signs that the kingdom of God is near.

III.

But no matter the season, we look all around us and see signs not of redemption but destruction; not of hope, but despair; not of peace, but hatred; not of joy but grief; not of love but death.

⁵ As quoted by Debi Thomas in her lectionary essay, “When You See These Things,” from November 25, 2018: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2018-when-you-see-these-things>

⁶ BBT, *The Seeds of Heaven*, p113.

Sisters and brothers, I know you see such signs: the signs of distress, indications of fear and forboding, and an oppressive darkness that seems to suffocate any spark of light around you. For just this week, several of you have told me about your darkneses, the distress in your daily lives. You've told me about the haunting grief that has relentlessly followed your loss, slipping in like a thief to steal any available moment of joy and flatten you cold. You've told me about the long sickness – of your own, your mother, your spouse, your child – that has wearied every moment, every relationship, every small and mundane task with the stubborn grind of chronic illness. You've told me about the fear of death that follows you around, that makes you assess your relationships, your stuff, your priorities to be sure your house is in order. You've told me about the memories that still surface from war, memories that persist no matter how many years have passed. You've told me about the anxieties that arise with each morning's dawn, the ways you feel like you just can't keep up, the paralysis of spirit that keeps you inside your home or your heart. You've told me about how engaging in this moment in the life of the world is just too hard sometimes – you feel helpless when watching injustice and hatred unfold at the border, on the streets, in the news; you feel rage when considering the inequities that leave some without and others with plenty, you feel terrified with each attack, each shooting, each act of violence because what if the next one finds *me*?

To you, to we who stand in the darkness with signs of despair all around us, Jesus shouts the transforming invitation: “now when these things

begin to take place, stand up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Advent is precisely that moment.

Fighting the urge of numbness, denial, indifference, neglect, despair in the face of these signs of the times takes Advent courage. Because Advent promises that when God comes into the world, nothing, nothing will remain unchanged.⁷ When God comes into the world, God’s ultimate dream for all creation will emerge as plainly as leaves sprouting on a fig tree, displaying their annual promise that summer is near. When God comes into the world, valleys are filled and mountains made low. When God comes into the world, crooked roads straighten up; rough patches are smoothed. When God comes into the world, mercy flows like the waves; the powerful are relieved of their greed, and the hungry are filled. When God comes into the world, ‘death’s dark shadows are put to flight’.⁸ When God comes into the world, signs of destruction become signs of redemption; the sign nailed upon a cross becomes a sign that death, and darkness, and despair, and destruction never has the final word.

So brothers and sisters, be alert and ready. Wait with dogged expectation. Face honestly your despair. Light that candle in the darkness. Ache for the light. Persist in hope, even when it seems impossible. Stand up, raise your heads, for your redemption is drawing near.

IV.

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, I began again my annual tradition of going through the year’s photos on my phone in order to find a few that will

⁷ Beautiful sermon about the pain of transformation by Ellen Davis called “Seasonal Tension,” from *Preaching the Luminous Word*, p243.

⁸ Quoting from “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” stanza 2.

soon be collected on a holiday card to tell the story of this year in our lives. I revisited image after image of the months now past, startled by viewing them in rapid succession of the number which captured damage and destruction all around us. There were the pictures of overturned trees and power outages that punctuated the hurricanes of this fall. And, of course, there were hundreds of pictures of demolition: cranes crashing into buildings, towers toppling into a pit, workers dismantling and dismembering that which had been once so carefully constructed. Burrowed in the cozy couch of my parents' living room, I was surprised to find that my heart raced, my anxiety rose, and every nerve ending seemed tense and firing. All the feelings of those months of demolition rushed back to the surface of my heart, and I was curious by the wild turbulence it conveyed to me, even there on the couch. My finger flew with the speed of my heart, swiping right quickly to avoid feeling the raw emotions of those days again.

But in the blur, my eye caught on a pop of silver. My curiosity slowed me down; I realized again what I was seeing. Towering in the background were those familiar sights of demolition: our bombed-out building, twisted steel, a gutter peeling off the side, a half-dismantled connector bridge, and a hulking green construction vehicle. But just to the left of the frame flew one solitary silver balloon, attached of course to the construction chain-link fence below. White and silver, with elegant black swirls and a scrawled word 'congratulations,' it was a marker, a cue, a sign that welcomed family to the wedding ceremony that morning of Jack Shearin and Vivian Rooker. Wouldn't you know it — there, amidst one end was a new beginning. In one darkness,

light. In one winter, summer was already near. Transformation, right here in our backyard. The signs were everywhere.

V.

Like balloons and signs on chain-link fences, like a fig tree heralding summer's flowering, the signs are everywhere. So, my friends, stand up. Raise your heads. For thanks be to God, our redemption is drawing near!

Come lord Jesus! Amen.