

Sermon Luke 21:25-36
"Signs of Confusion"

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars" (Luke 21:25).

Here we are, with the Christmas season off to a running start, with all the stores and television commercials running in high gear. For me, I am still on the old-fashioned side of resisting the pull of Christmas until at least after Thanksgiving, maybe even up to the week of Christmas. Sure, Thanksgiving is now over. Now, it is time to get ready for the real reason for Christmas, the season of Advent.

The word "Advent," which comes from the Latin word *adventus* for "coming," focuses our attention on the coming of Christ, not just at Christmas but also in his promised return. We join with many other Christians in doing something that is also rather old-fashioned, something that goes against the grain of our world. The scripture readings assigned for the season of Advent help us to do that and focus on the more reflective preparation that we are called to undertake at this time of year. The scriptures remind us of the spiritual preparation that is required to prepare for the return of our Savior. Prepare Ye the way of the Lord, spoken through the prophet Isaiah—a call to make straight paths for the Lord in the wilderness.

There was a time when the season of Advent was a strange churchy concept. The period of Advent was one of the last additions to what is now known as the Liturgical Calendar, which was added in the 5th century. In one moment of history, the original theological meaning of Advent came under two different interpretations, celebrating the Nativity of Jesus Christ and later extending to the joyous expectation of the Parousia, a theological term meaning the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, today, Advent continues in a twofold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ's first coming to us is remembered, and as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's Second Coming at the end of time, and thus, Advent is a period for devout and joyful expectation. But as we will find out today, the Second Coming of Christ has been marked with *"Signs of Confusion."* Let's pray.

Lord, our God, we praise you for Your Son, Jesus Christ, for He is Emmanuel, the hope of all people. He is the wisdom that teaches and guides us. He is the Savior of us all. O Lord, let your blessing come down upon us. Raise our heads in expectation that we may yearn for the coming Day of the Lord and stand without blame before your Son, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Advent calendars used to hold a secret only known to the church, but now they have crossed over to popular culture. These calendars have nothing to do with Advent other than counting down the days to Christmas or marking the passing of time in this season of preparation. But even the countdown to Christmas, which Advent calendars help us to do, can mislead us into thinking that the coming of Christ is entirely predictable. *"There will be signs,"* Jesus tells us in today's gospel reading, signs that the kingdom of God is near. It's not on an Advent calendar, but hints that the days are drawing closer. Signs? What signs? How do we go about interpreting his words or making sense of it all? Confusing? Since today marks the sign of a new church year, perhaps we should look at the bigger picture at other times recorded in the gospels.

Perhaps the most infamous of the signs mentioned in chapter 2, verse 12 of Luke's Gospel is one that we will hear about on Christmas Eve when the angels appear in the night sky to proclaim to the shepherds **the good news** of great joy. And they tell them that there will be a sign for them: *"This will be a sign for you; you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."* It's not a sign in the sun, or moon, or the stars, like in today's gospel reading, but a sign found lying in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. How do we interpret this sign? This sign teaches that God comes to us not only at unexpected times but also in unexpected ways. The Son of God, born humbly and placed in a manger, is a sign for us to teach us to look for God not only in the stars but right here among us in the good news of surprise and joy.

Then, there was a sign in the Temple in Jerusalem. That shouldn't be so surprising to find a sign there. Perhaps a sign regarding the Lord's name, scores of Old Testament scriptures putting His name in a temple because He gives authority for His name to be used in the sacred ordinances of that house. Simeon stood in the Temple, waiting there for many years. When Joseph and Mary arrived to present Jesus to the Lord, as instructed by the Old Testament writings, he took Jesus into his arms and gave thanks, knowing that this was the sign he had been seeking. Simeon then warned Mary that her son would be a sign that would be opposed by many. In Luke 2:29, we read, *"Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace."* How do you interpret a baby lying a manger to be a threat? Seems like a "sign of confusion." But Jesus was not just a baby lying in a manger. Nope, not at all.

Jesus grew up, becoming a sign of God's love for all people. He proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom and invited everyone to come to repentance, turn away from their sins, and then hear him say; you are forgiven. He ate with the wrong crowd, healed on the Sabbath, and got into trouble with the wrong people, making them uneasy because he was different, radical, and not of this world. Jesus became a sign, but not the sign people wanted to see. So, the people tested him and demanded a sign from Jesus, a sign from heaven.

How about the sign of Jonah? Remember him, the prophet who was cast overboard to save the rest of the people in the ship from perishing, then swallowed by a large fish, remaining there for three days? Was Jonah a sign of a foreshadowing of Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection after three days in the tomb? Jesus referred to Jonah in both Matthew and Luke. We read in Luke 11:29-30 "This generation is evil; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to his generation." Jesus also said that "the men of Nineveh will stand at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they **repented** at the preaching of Jonah, and now One greater than Jonah is here. Jesus called Jonah a prophet of God and referred to himself as "greater than Jonah." Even the hated people of Nineveh were given the opportunity to turn to God and be forgiven. Was this a sign of confusion, meaning the sign that Jonah brings us back to Jonah's radical message of repentance and hope for all? **Repent** and believe the good news.

Here is another sign that Jesus refers to in Luke's gospel that comes before today's reading in 17:20, so it is essential that we not miss it. When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus answered them, *"The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!'"* for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." What? Is the kingdom of God NOT coming with signs in the sun, moon, and stars? Here is the point. We should not get so caught up in looking for signs that we

are no longer able to see that the Kingdom of God is right here in the midst of us. Is He coming again? Yes! But guess what, friends? He also promised never to leave! He promised to always be with us!

As confusing of a sign as it may seem, He is here now, when we gather as a community in his name, to hear His Word and share in the Lord's Supper, as we will in just a bit. But not just now but always. Like the air around us, always here, just not aware of it. He is our Emmanuel, our God with us, who never leaves or forsakes us. He is with us always. We don't always notice. Why? Because old sneaky is lurking around the corner, just waiting to step in to trip us up, to knock us off our feet, to bring out the worst in us. Sometimes, people get so caught up looking for signs that they lose sight.

Some people look toward the future with fear, anxiety, and worry, while others will have hope, eagerness, and optimism. Jesus said in verse 26, "People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming of the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken." I suspect most of us, depending on the day, live with both of those outlooks. When have you jumped out of bed ready to get the new day started, excited about the possibilities of what could or might be? Some days, I get up and say to myself, I dread what could happen today. Other days, I rise and can't wait to get started.

Regardless of which it is, psychologically, our brains experience uncertainty as a threat. Thus, we should recognize the importance of seizing the present moment and shaping it to create a better future. An author on Religion, John Caputo, writes, "Advent opens the present by promising us the possibility of something new, the chance of something different, something that will transform the present into something else." Caputo is not talking about the foreseeable future but the unforeseeable future. Pat and I will often ask each other, "What is your plan for tomorrow? What have you got going on? We might talk about vacation or even retirement. We talk about the foreseeable future, the future we are planning to have some control over, and the future toward which we are working. Maybe with a bit of luck, that future will be as we plan. But the unforeseeable future comes like a thief in the night, taking us by surprise. The signs can be confusing. How can you prepare when you cannot see, know, or understand? Only God knows.

I'll bet every one of you knows what I am talking about. I am betting every one of you has felt the unforeseeable future pry open and forever change your life. That's how Mary felt when the angel Gabriel announced that she would give birth to the Son of God. In Advent, the unforeseeable future comes to us as a chance for something new, for a new birth, or the expectation of hope. Advent does not promise an escape from the circumstances of our lives or the world. That does not mean that we give up when the sands beneath our lives are shifting. We do not give up when things come unhinged, when our ability is driven to its limit, or "when we are overwhelmed, exposed to something we cannot see, manage, or foresee coming. And we do not give up on each other.

I am not talking about rosy optimism or determined perseverance. I am talking about staying open to the possibility of the impossible, to a future we could never imagine. I am talking about the call of faith, hope, love, courage, compassion, understanding, beauty, forgiveness, and healing. In closing, I do not know what the future holds for you or me, and neither do you. But I know this. Those things I just listed – faith, hope, love, courage, compassion, beauty, forgiveness, and healing are the voice of Advent. They speak to the possibility of a new life, a

transformed life, and they call us from the most improbable, unforeseen, and impossible places in our lives. They will pull you into and through the rest of the day. And when we wake up tomorrow morning, guess what? They will be there, waiting. Does what I speak appear as confusing signs? William Barclay reminds us that “*The best way to prepare for the coming Christ is never to forget the presence of Christ.*” Let us do this faithfully for his coming by being constantly mindful of his presence. Glory be to God. Amen.