

Signs of the Times

Isaiah 5:1-7

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

Yes, Jesus. We know how to interpret the weather, but we do not know how to interpret the present time ... Seems true enough. Actually, we're notoriously bad at predicting the weather especially when it comes to forecasts more than 3 days in advance. And although we all do spend ridiculous amounts of time consulting the Weather Channel, it frequently does us little good in being adequately prepared for what lies ahead. Invariably, the umbrella you need is in the car when you are not, the day you put all your winter clothes away is the day it snows 10 inches, and every time it rains, folks, we all know it was because you finally got around to washing your car.

So maybe we're not so great at interpreting the signs of the sky, but what about the signs of the times? Hmm? Well, reading The Times can be downright confusing too, if not absolutely hysterical. For example, here are some bona fide headlines drawn directly from the newspaper¹: Stolen painting found by tree..... Squad helps dog bite victim..... Police begin campaign to run down jaywalkers..... Juvenile court to try shooting defendant..... Iraqi head seeks arms..... These are real headlines and yes they are both silly and startling. They conjure up ridiculous images in our mind's eye, but they are also filled with the violence and indifference that is a constant part of our daily lives. And so, in some measure, they are the "signs of the times."

Please pray with me:

Holy God, let us come to this Living Word with hearts wide open. We are your people, called by your name, your beloved. Teach us how live into such wondrous love as yours with courage and integrity and hope. Today and always. May these musings of my heart and these murmurings of my lips be acceptable in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

"I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth! No, I tell you, but rather division!"

I do not remember this story from Sunday School. I remember the story of Jesus kneeling down to welcome the little children. I remember the story of the Good Samaritan who helps the traveler by the roadside. I remember the story of the father who opens his arms wide to welcome his wayward son home. I remember the story of the angels singing 'Peace on earth, and good will to humankind.' But try as I might, I do not remember hearing anything about fire, or baptisms in blood, or divisions within families. I remember Jesus as peacemaker, not home breaker..... But I guess.....after all..... that's not what got him crucified.....

The scriptures that confront us from the lectionary today carry an ominous tone. They show us another side of Jesus...not Jesus meek and mild, but Jesus probing, prompting, poking us out of our complacency; while the prophet Isaiah tells us of the great Gardener, tender and keeper, provider and protector, crying over his vineyard, his beloved people - his covenant children - from whom he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry.

These are the signs of *our* times, cries of injustice from every country on the planet, the very globe itself groaning in environmental distress, this is a world in crisis, and hard for us to confront. And today, in this world in crisis, we meet Jesus, the crisis of the world. That's right: I said Jesus is the crisis of the world! Crisis: the moment of judgment, the moment of decision, the moment of truth. Jesus as Crisis forces us to make decisions, decisions that have real consequences, decisions that demand our total commitment, decisions that divide families and make a difference. For Jesus as crisis brings the refiner's fire that purifies his people like gold and silver, until they are able to present offerings to the Lord in righteousness (Malachi 3:3).

Today, Jesus' words challenge us to interpret the signs of the times that confront us on the street, in our newspapers, from our television screens. Teresa Berger, professor of Theology at Duke said: "If our world were nothing but a place of created goodness and profound beauty, a space of flourishing for all, just and life-giving for all in God's creation, then Jesus' challenge would be deeply troubling. If, on the other hand, our world is deeply marred and scarred, death-dealing for many life forms, with systems of meaning that are exploitative and non-sustainable, then redemption can come only when those systems are shattered and consumed by fire. Life cannot re-emerge without confrontation. This is the basis of the division Jesus (describes). He comes not to disturb a nice, (comfortable) world but to shatter the disturbing and death-dealing systems of meaning that stifle life."ⁱⁱⁱ Yes.....after all..... that's what got him crucified.....

Yes, today, just as two thousand years ago, Jesus is the crisis of our world, critiquing and criticizing the signs of our times: the congress that just sold your right to privacy so that the White House can deepen the surveillance of your life; the expensive and extensive television marketing of pharmaceuticals while millions cannot afford their prescription medications; the transnational corporations that exploit cheap labor so that you and I can have cheap goods; the media which sells scandal and promiscuity and violence and consumerism to make a profit; the city that sweeps the homeless and derelict off the streets so that you and I will not have the discomfort of the accusation they present to us. Jesus came and Jesus continues to come into the crisis of our world, presenting himself as the real crisis of our world, the turning point on which we hinge, the "edge where for each one of us change is possible."ⁱⁱⁱ

And this is the *Good News*, folks! But the witness of Scripture tells us that God believes change is possible. In fact it is the key to our scriptural faith from the first chapter in *Genesis*, when the word repentance appears. Repent—turn around—change! In the name of the one who came to bring New Life—new ways of thinking and new ways of doing and new ways of being. Change is possible. So the one who we thought was a peacemaker suddenly says, "I have come to break and challenge the status quo. I come to bring crisis because business as usual means injustice and death. I have come to bring **NEW** life."

These are good words for us to hear today. They rightly challenge us as the Church, who over so many centuries of Christian establishment and power, suffers a legacy of security and complacency. They rightly challenge any assumption we might make that our faith is purely a private matter of the heart. They rightly challenge the misconception that faith is an individualized experience. And these challenges are necessary if our faith is going to be big enough to confront the issues of our day. A private, individualized, complacent faith has no means with which to engage the signs of our times, the crisis of our world today: the systemic sin, which is rampantly expressed in our culture of power and violence and greed and materialism that touches every corner of our lives.

But take heart, my friends, because change is possible. That's the message of our Scriptures and it's good news because it reassures us that evil can be overcome, repentance is possible, judgment need not be the last word, destruction is not inevitable. That's the message preached to us through the letter to the Hebrews: that throughout the ages, God is working out a plan for fulfillment of God's reign on earth, and God calls ordinary men and women to participate in the ongoing creation story. Friends, you and I have joined the list of names that curve through time to the apex of Jesus Christ, in whom all things are possible. We ourselves are not called to be the savior of the world, but we are called to follow Jesus. Follow him.

Follow him who knows how to reads and respond to the signs of the times. Follow him who has the courage to speak truth to power. Follow him who lives compassion to side with the outcast and oppressed. Follow him who questions the values and priorities of every generation. Follow him who will challenge you to live fully into your humanity. Follow him who offers life in the place of death. Follow him, who runs before us and has finished the race on our behalf. Follow him, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith. Follow him.

ⁱ Edward L. Shirley, in Ecunet [database online], cited 29 November 1994.

ⁱⁱ Teresa Berger, Disturbing the Peace (Luke 12:49-56), *The Christian Century*, August 10, 2004, p.18.