

Luke 21:25-36, Psalm 25:1-10

Signs of God's goodness

On November 19th, I dutifully set my alarm for 4:08 am. The news had told me that there was a once in an every 500 years event happening and I didn't want to miss it.

Going against every urge to stay in bed, and following my strong FOMO instincts — that's fear of missing out — I went looking for the partial lunar eclipse. Out in my front yard in my pj's, phone in hand ('cause you have to take a picture to make it real), I stood in awe at the "diamond ring" light effect around the moon.

As far as I could tell I was all alone. I wondered why more people weren't out marvelling with me. I mean, once in 500 years! And I wondered about how people in generations past might have interpreted an eclipse as a sign of some kind of miracle or catastrophe. And then I realized that they probably weren't very different than we are, then and now, they probably just missed seeing it altogether.

Isn't that how the world works, after all? Not everyone sees the same thing when looking at the same thing.

This part in the Gospel of Luke (and in the other Gospels), about signs in the heavens, is often known as "the little Apocalypse." Nowadays we think of apocalypse as the end of the world (so it's hard to think how that could be little), but apocalypse originally means the revealing of all things.

The disciples were sitting there admiring the great temple of their day, and Jesus warned that not everything is as it seems.

The passage is filled with images that would have been familiar to the Jewish hearers of the day:

- "the roaring of the sea and waves" was the metaphorical churning powers of chaos that we first meet in Genesis 1.

- The distress of the nations - refers to people who do not follow God's ways (Torah) and cannot find a way out.¹
- The powers of heaven - are powers beyond human control.

To us it all sounds a bit abstract and might be a little too close to the wild sounding "radio evangelists" who are all about predicting the exact date and specific manner in which Jesus will return to vindicate their point of view. They always seem to miss the part about how this will catch people unaware. The part about how NOBODY knows when it takes place!

The people who first heard this Gospel sometime between the year 60-80 were still reeling from brutal and very real events. Many of the things Jesus is predicting in that narrative had already happened once this was written down. There had already been a kind of end of the world as they knew it. The First Jewish Revolt against Rome, ended up with thousands of people dead and the destruction of the Jewish Temple and polity in Jerusalem.² The gospels have recorded Jesus' "prediction" in hindsight, maybe more to remember than to warn at that point.

So you see, the sense of timing - written in the future about a past that predicts a future — does not allow anyone (much less us) to read this with any kind of certainty that these events lie somewhere within our own future or not. It's also not clear what "the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and glory" means. Was it about the resurrection? Is it about some event still in our own future? Or a so-called "second" triumphal coming of Jesus — not that triumphal was ever Jesus' approach to things. We simply don't know and the text tells us that.

And that's kind of the point that Jesus was making here, which is: You don't know what happens next so pay attention! Stay on track. Don't fritter away life in dissipation. Be aware but don't despair. **The God who ordered the powers of chaos when creating the world is at work in history and can save what seems to humans like a dire situation.**

Can we believe that promise this Advent? That God has unexpected outcomes in store? Outcomes that overthrow the powers of this world? Can we kindle that hope?

¹ <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2018/11/27/a-provocation-first-sunday-on-advent-december-2-2018-luke-2125-36/>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Jewish–Roman_War

We've got plenty of troubling signs of our own. Do I really need to list them? Here are a few:

- Floods destroying human infrastructure and leaving people stranded.
- Old grown forests being cut down, fossil fuels exploited: and those two are not unrelated.
- A new strain of this never-ending pandemic!
- Drove of refugees dying to escape violence, famine and finding discrimination
- Wars that keep on happening in the same places over and over again about the same things.
- And at this time of year, there's another troubling sign: people drunk on consumerism

What would Jesus say to comfort us, if he were looking at the signs of doom and disaster that we see today?

Well, he'd probably say something along the lines of what he said in the Gospel when he pointed out the constancy and predictability of the fig tree.

"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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the reign of God is near." (V.29)

OK, Jesus, but right now I'm still a bit with Audrey West a New Testament Professor who put it this way: "Despite the promise of spring, however, new buds do not always form. Sometimes they are killed by drought or swept away by the roaring waves of a hundred-year flood—for the third time in six years. Fires rage through forests and woods, darkening the sun and sending evidence of ash and smoke even thousands of miles away. Hillsides are cleared for the sake of a better view, corporations fell rainforests in order to improve their bottom line, and nations install border-walls that cut through orchards and separate trees from the people who attend to their care.

The devastation is enough to take one's breath away—which is the meaning of the Greek word translated as "faint" in Luke 21:26: People will faint (apopsychō = to stop breathing, be breathless) from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."

And then she concludes: "Nonetheless, the apocalyptic vision shared by Jesus is assurance that even (especially) in the face of devastation—whether it is caused by nature's fury or by human hubris—the reign of God will not be impeded. **No matter how much it appears that the world is coming un-done, God's way endures.**"

Alright, let's try again.

Jesus 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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the reign of God is near.” (V.29)

I know a little bit about figs and about looking forward to them. When I was growing up in Brazil, our Mennonite church was located in a hilly town nearby called Valinhos (little hills). As we drove there each Sunday we'd look out on those hills and see greyish-green groves of fig trees. I can still get transported back to my childhood just by biting into an almost-ripe fig (when they're ripe they're too sweet, in my opinion). It's great to imagine that figs are on their way.

Given how often this little apocalypse has been used to instill fear, it seems important to highlight that Jesus was offering **comfort** to his disciples — he wasn't issuing dire warnings. He was reminding them of the cyclical nature of our world and its “signs.” And most of all that the reign of God keeps showing up as surely as those fig leaves. It was an exercise in remembering and not giving in to fear.

When I was looking up at that eclipse to me it wasn't a sign of doom a gloom but a reminder of one of the many unseen long-game cycles that I am caught up in. Once in every 500 years, it keeps on happening whether I'm there to see it or not. It was a helpful shift in perspective.

Here's another cheesy practical example that I use to shift perspective:

I once heard someone say that when they saw an ambulance rushing by they'd think: “Oh, no somebody is in trouble.” And they'd get distressed. Then they shifted and when they saw an ambulance they'd think: “Help is on the way.” And they'd pray for the people involved.

So now, at the start of Advent in this “already and not yet” time here is our challenge. Dare we see the signs of God's reign among all the dire warnings? Can we hope that the things beyond our control are in God's hands and in the cycles of God's timing?

This season I'll be trying an exercise in hope maybe you'd like to try it as well: looking for signs of God's kindom and fanning that flame. So here's me trying:

- When seeing stories of abuse, as heartbreaking and infuriating as they are, I am grateful that we live in a time when victims are more and more being believed and justice is being pursued.
- When seeing the floods on each Canadian coast at this point, we also hear about stories of heroism and mutual generosity and care.
- When hearing about racism in the trials that have been in recent media, we also see signs that the waters of justice are beginning to flood across unjust legal systems and to corrode their foundations.
- When hearing about pipelines and immoral tree cutting, we also see people putting their lives on the line to propose another way,
- When hearing about climate change, we also hear about prophets and water defenders bringing ancient wisdom and being heard.

And so on...

We are not alone in looking for the signs of God's kindom. We stand with generations who have put their trust in God's goodness, God's provision and God's power, including the psalm writer that we heard earlier.

"Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long. "

Finally, I see another hopeful sign, I see our congregation, people who are committed to a different way of being in this world, the way of Christ, people who put their trust in God. May God be present each time we make a choice away from despair. May we help each other to see the signs of hope and remember God's faithfulness.