

Reading the Signs Makes All the Difference

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on the First Sunday of Advent

Based on Luke 21: 25-31

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Give us ears to hear, O God, and eyes to watch, that we may know your presence in our midst during this holy season of joy as we anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ. Amen.

A priest and a pastor from the local parishes are standing by the side of the road holding up a sign that reads,

The End is Near!

Turn yourself around now before it's too late!

"Leave us alone you religious nuts!" yelled the first driver as he sped by.

From around the curve they heard screeching tires and a big crash.

"Do you think," said one clergy to the other, "we should just put up a sign that says, 'BRIDGE OUT' instead?"

The scripture presented to us the cosmic signs of the sun, the moon, and the stars and sprouting leaves as signs of the times. The passage from ancient wisdom reinforces the idea that knowing how to read the signs makes all the difference.

Advent begins today. Advent is a season, a theological concept, and a life experience and as a life experience it is perhaps the place to begin. As a season and a tradition it is fading away and maybe we should let it disappear. Our hearts and minds seem to be shaped more by the retail calendar and we want to jump to Christmas. In fact, we are in such a hurry to recapture something about Christmas that we allow ourselves to be led by the wallet starting around Halloween. This misdirection and being misled is the kind of thing that the scripture warns us about when it says, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap." While Advent is not about Christmas directly, it is about anticipating what is to come and as a society it seems to me that we are more comfortable with singing about Santa coming to town than

we are contemplating about God coming into our lives, our neighborhoods, our nations, and our world in a new way. It should not surprise us that this is the case. Santa's coming and going is much easier than Jesus' coming and staying.

There is a great irony that perhaps only preacher creatures can appreciate. While Advent is about what is to come it is in fact not coming but leaving. Despite its fading away as a season and a theological concept some ministers still beat the Advent drum and we do our best to hold the line between Advent and Christmas. To do this makes me understand what it feels like to be the rear reindeer in a long line of reindeer working all night long without a break. Advent's power and meaning has shifted from the weeks preceding Christmas to the weeks following Christmas as we anticipate the coming of credit card bills. Do you see the signs? They are cosmic in nature and they portend a great change in our lives.

But there are hopeful signs as well. A few days ago people shared their Thanksgiving blessings with the guests of Family Promise. This is a good sign and promise of positive things to come for us and the Family Promise guests. Rainbow Rocks provided leadership in the collection of food which resulted in 1464 lbs. of turkey (97 turkeys) and 980 lbs. of other food, and cash donations totaled \$820.00. The workers of the food bank were convinced that they would have to close down Monday afternoon because their shelves were empty. When the truck from Shadow Rock pulled up it was a sign that made a cosmic difference in the lives of families for this Thanksgiving. Please understand these are not just acts of kindness these are signs of what the world is becoming.

We celebrate these signs of faith, hope, and love but we have to strain our eyes of faith to see the big picture. We have to strain our eyes of faith to see beyond the particular event and read the signs as cosmic signs. We have to look closer and farther at the same time to see the real power and meaning of Advent in these events. The power and meaning of Advent is in the living of the time between depleted shelves at the food bank and the arrival of a truck that can replenish the shelves. We have these kinds of Advent seasons and moments all the time. These in between times are characterized by living on the edge.

This is the season to recognize the edginess of life. All of us have those times when we were acutely aware that we are on the edge of something new or something different. All of us have stood on the edge of a moment between *what is and what is to be*.

Advent is two people standing at opposite ends of a church aisle anticipating the end of the wedding march, clasping hands, and joyfully expecting the exchange of vows that will forever change their lives. Unfortunately, not everyone we love in our fellowship is given the same legal status and benefit but we stand facing the future in an Advent time knowing that one day it will happen. We stand as a fellowship between what is and what is to be. In this meantime what is the most loving, inclusive, and just action? Advent is waiting for a medical test result, the birth of a child, and the homecoming of a soldier. Advent is that edge between life and death.

Advent is an invitation for us to consider that life is most dynamic and God is most present in that place between what is and what will be. God is in that moment. Life is most dynamic in that moment. A legitimate question is, "What moment is not pregnant with potential and therefore full of promise and hope?" There is no such moment.

There is an unfinished sculpture by Michelangelo called the Captive Slave. This sculpture demonstrates Michelangelo's approach to carving. Michelangelo often referred to the process of sculpting as one which he discovers the form which is already imprisoned in the stone. He believed that his work was to release what was already there. With very little imagination you can see the figure of a human being emerging from the stone. The figure is struggling to free itself from the stone and the stone is pushing the figure out of itself. Life is pushing and pulling itself into a more complete and greater expression. Life is caught between stone and freedom, between what is and what will be. Remember, this piece of art is called the Captive Slave.

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel!"

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel (which means "God is With Us"), and ransom captive Israel!"

Advent speaks to the dynamic and creative presence of life and God in every moment. "O Come, O Come, God is With Us and bring freedom to all people."

Advent gives us the image of God standing in the future and pulling all of creation to fulfillment of its loving potential into being.

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel!"

The cosmic signs of the sun, the moon, and the stars and sprouting leaves are signs of the times. The birth of Jesus is a sign of the times to come. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and through us ransom the captive lives of all people everywhere."