**December 2, 2018**

**Luke 21:25-36**

On the wall of his study, theologian Karl Barth hung a famous painting of the crucifixion by the German Renaissance artist Matthias Grünewald. There are 5 figures in the picture: Jesus is in the center, on the cross, his body ragged, and fingers grasping for help that won’t come. Three people stand and kneel to the left of the cross, grieving the horror before them. John the Baptist stands to the right of the cross, with an extra-long finger raised this way, directing and pointing the onlooker to Jesus. In this gesture, the painter Grünewald reiterated both John’s job – to “prepare the way of the Lord” – and also our job to keep our eyes on Jesus. It’s said that when Barth talked about his own theological work and writing, he directed people to Grünewald’s figure of John the Baptist saying, “I want to be that finger.” I want to be a sign pointing to Jesus. I want to be a sign pointing to Christ’s victory.

Late last summer while the days were still long and warm, the sunlight began a colorful dance through the tree across from the manse’s front bay window. There was a flash of red on the outer leaves, and an orange glow from the heart of the tree. That tree is always the first to change each year. It is the herald of cooler days ahead, and the beginning of a new color palate in the neighborhood. None of the other trees even hinted at a change. The rest were still green, tinged a little brown. But that tree couldn’t be convinced otherwise. I knew when I saw that tree change that I needed to get my rake ready and extra bags for collecting leaves. I knew that it was time to bring out my warm clothes and put away my summer clothes. Just so, in the spring, when the tree branch ends grow fat with buds, we know that we can pack our coats and snow shovels away. You don’t have to be an expert to see the signs of changing times and prepare for what’s coming.

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees,” Jesus said, “as soon as they sprout leaves you know that summer is coming. So also, when you see these things that we’ve talked about taking place, *you* know that the kingdom of God is near.”

Christians today have lived far beyond Christ’s life and the lives of the disciples. We were promised that God was coming soon, yet we’ve read the history books and know that he hasn’t come *yet*. We know that Jesus won the day on Easter. We know that God is supposed to win the end of all days. *And* we know that the game of life is not over, and that final victory lap is just wishful thinking at this point. Since our days are not over, since Christ has not yet returned, we have to keep working and getting ready for that big day. I don’t think our job is to stand on the corner holding a sign that says “The End is Near.” But I do believe that we are called to live in such a way that our very lives are the signs proclaiming to the world, “God’s New Beginning is Near.” Our lives should be like a movie preview that makes people buy advance tickets for the real show. We should be the warm-up act that excites the audience for the main attraction. We’re the people giving out food samples at Costo, sending everyone home with an unexpected but now strangely desirable giant cheesecake.

Our job is to point the way to Jesus, and create a hunger for what people don’t know they’re missing. We are proclaiming the kingdom of God to those near and far. And if we do a good job, they can simply look at the life of the faithful, loving Christian to see what God’s future holds. No more crystal balls or tarot cards; we are the sign and show of things to come. We are the leaves on that first fall tree. We are pointing to the changing season, foretelling Christ-who’s-coming, and inviting the world to join our colorful dance. [[1]](#footnote-1)

We are a sign of God’s time, not the controllers. God’s time goes above and beyond our time, likely into the fourth dimension, though even physics can’t describe it. The church year dabbles in God’s time, but Advent is the only dedicated season when we try to live into God’s mysterious, unpredictable time. These are the days when we try to grasp the now and the “not yet.” When we read prophetic scripture about a Messiah to be, the Messiah who was, and a Savior “coming *soon*” – whatever “soon” means 2000 years after the promise…??? These are the days when we pray both for Christ to come to our manger soon (meaning Christmas Day), and also when we pray for Christ to return to the world soon (meaning today, tomorrow, this week!). It is an esoteric concept with an everlasting wait. “How long, O Lord,” we cry with the faithful who have waited through the ages.

Like any good parent with an anxious child, God gives us work to do in the interim. Our everyday Advent work is to point to God’s signs in the world. When we do our work, when we focus on the task at hand, when we are first paying attention to God, we stop paying attention to the bad behavior in the world. We ignore politicians’ temper tantrums and ridiculous grasps at power. We brush past entertainment that withers the fruits of the Spirit. We don’t give the time of day to greed or pride of envy. We spin our anxious energy into the task at hand: watching and hoping and pointing and telling. When we pay such close attention to God and to the world, we are *bound* to see Christ’s signs. And when we see regular glimpses of God’s shadow going around the corner, and hear sound-bytes of God humming in the other room, our watching and waiting doesn’t feel so long or hopeless, for we feel God’s imminent presence.

We see a someone paying for a stranger’s lunch. We see a driver respond with grace when someone cuts them off. We see a doctor freely treating a patient unable to pay for their services. We see Presbyterians pooling their offerings to rebuild homes of hurricane victims. We see this presbytery offering Sanctuary to “illegal” Long Islanders. We see Christians leaving water stations in the Arizona desert for people crossing the border illegally. We see animals caught in wildfires being rehabilitated by firefighters. We see teenagers working to end gun violence and change national policy. We see one man plant over 2 million trees to combat deforestation. [[2]](#footnote-2) We see a Syrian refugee stuck in an airport between customs and a hospitable country for seven months welcomed to a new home by a stranger’s family. [[3]](#footnote-3) If we watch for signs of God in the world, we will see Jesus among us.

But if we *don’t* do our chores, if (instead of actively watching and waiting and pointing to God at work in the world) we lounge on the couch until the big event, we begin to languish in our longing. We read the newspapers and *l-o-n-g* for Christ’s peace. We see the pictures of global conflict and *l-o-n-g* for hope. We long for wellness and well-being, affordable and accessible healthcare for all people. We long for people to stay in their homes, that they would have enough work and political stability and safety so that they would never *need* to flee. We long for countries to have open borders, welcoming those in need of shelter. We long for military and police to put away their weapons – guns and tear gas both – that we would have the time and patience to listen to one another and work with one another. The longings easily unnerve and discombobulate us so that we completely forget the work we were given to do. We become paralyzed by the *not yet* instead of trusting in the already and coming soon.

Some people paralyzed by this longing don’t look to Christ’s coming as a day of joy, but fear the final changing of seasons. People worry about the end times, concerned that God’s final reckoning will banish them from whatever they might have known and loved. To them Jesus said here in Luke, “when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Your redemption, not your damnation. Your salvation, not your death sentence. Your hope and rest. This is what Christ promised.

Thomas Merton wrote in “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room”:

[The “when” of the time of the end?] That is not the question. To say it is the time of the end is to answer all the questions, for if it is the time of the end, and of great tribulation, then it is certainly and above all the time of the Great Joy. For the true [eternal heavenly] banquet is not that of the birds on the bodies of the slain. It is the feast of the living, the wedding banquet of the Lamb. The true [eternal heavenly] convocation is not the crowding of armies on the field of battle, but the summons of the Great Joy, the cry of deliverance… To leave the city of death and imprisonment is surely not bad news except to those who have so identified themselves with their captivity that they can conceive no other reality and no other condition… What is needed then is the grace and courage to see that ‘The Great Tribulation’ and ‘The Great Joy’ are really inseparable, and that the ‘Tribulation’ becomes ‘Joy’ when it is seen as the Victory of Life over Death.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

God’s rules is not like earthly tyrants. God’s rule is practiced with justice and mercy, grace and love. Because that is so, we can trust that the final coming – the final changing of time – will be a day of great joy and celebration. Finally, our work will be complete. Finally, our deliverance will be achieved. Finally, we can sit and feast with the Lamb and the saints triumphant!

Our real work this Advent season is watching and waiting for Christ. And while some people say, “If you’re not afraid, you’re not paying attention,” we can say the opposite. If we are waiting and watching for Christ, if we are paying attention, we have no reason to fear. We have reason to hope. For God, Immanuel, is here and also coming near. God is with us and drawing even nearer. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

1. “Coming Soon” sermon preached at Duke Divinity School on July 29, 2009 by Jeremy Troxler (UMC). https://www.faithandleadership.com/coming-soon [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/mangrove-master-has-planted-2-million-saplings/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/after-living-in-airport-for-7-months-refugee-lands-in-canada/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Merton, Thomas. “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room,” in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 365-367. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)