

There Will Be Signs

Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

Luke 21:25-36 NRSV

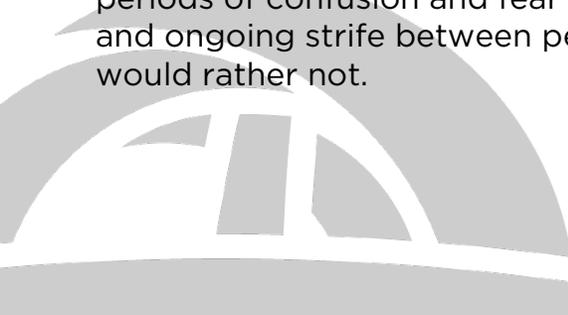
²⁵There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." ²⁹Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

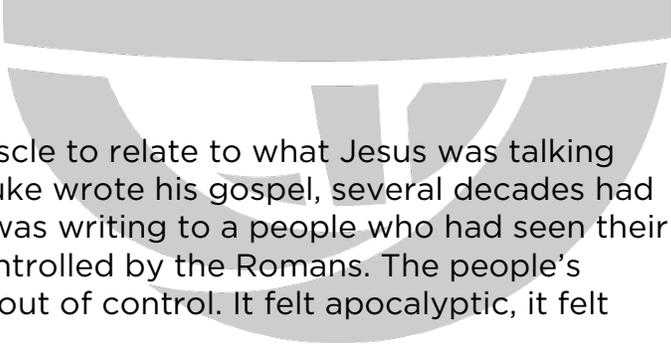
Good morning. I wish I were with you in person this morning. This last week I had the unwelcomed experience of getting COVID. I'm feeling much better than earlier this week and look forward to being with you for Advent worship on Wednesday.

Let's pray together. God, sometimes the disruptions we experience in life can feel like the end of the world. As we live in the liminal space of things we cannot control, give us hope to hold on to and faith to trust that we are in your good care, now and always. Amen.

News broke this week that a potentially, more dangerous variant of COVID has emerged in southern Africa and parts of Asia. It feels like déjà vu all over again, doesn't it? The stock market is down. International travel is being restricted. Will stores be out of toilet paper and Clorox wipes soon, too?

I was talking to a friend on Friday and we wondered if that "new normal" we've all been anticipating for so long is ever going to arrive, or if this is it. The signs point to ongoing periods of confusion and fear of what may or may not come - of overstressed systems, and ongoing strife between people who seek to take this disease seriously and those who would rather not.





We don't need to flex too much imaginative muscle to relate to what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel this morning. By the time Luke wrote his gospel, several decades had passed since Jesus' death and resurrection. He was writing to a people who had seen their temple destroyed and Jerusalem completely controlled by the Romans. The people's entire world had been upended. Everything felt out of control. It felt apocalyptic, it felt like the end of the world.

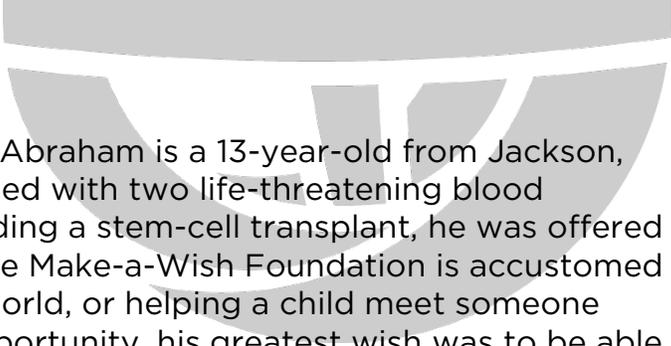
Luke used apocalyptic language to name things that were already happening. Jesus' words weren't a prediction of what would come later. It was a confirmation of what already was taking place - both the calamity and a way through it. We often think of apocalyptic images as doom and gloom, of judgment and destruction. But look more carefully at what Jesus says, and we see that he is offering hope and encouragement to those weighed down by world events and daily struggle. He calls for an act of defiance amidst the fear and foreboding. Jesus says, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Not everyone will see it. Not everyone will want to see it. But Jesus says to those with ears to hear and eyes to perceive that no matter the circumstances, God's redemption is always nearer than we think. It is always to be anticipated, despite the kinds of chaos that rage in the world.

Pastor Andy Stanley from North Pointe Church in Atlanta tells a story about his own weariness of dealing with COVID and waiting for the "new normal" to emerge out of the pandemic and brutality and chaos of the last several years. One day, a few months ago, he met with an 87-year-old man who told him about how he lived through polio, and diphtheria, and the Vietnam War and civil unrest related to it. Andy said that despite all of that he was still enchanted with life. Pastor Andy asked the man if the pandemic had been especially difficult for him. He replied, "No, I learned a long time ago not to see the world through the printed headlines. I see the world through the people around me. I see the world with the realization that we love big. Therefore, he said, I choose to write my own headlines: "Husband loves wife today." "Family drops everything to come to grandma's bedside." "Old man makes new friend."

Advent is an intentional season of defiance against the headlines of chaos and fear that the world tries to heap on us. This season takes seriously the presence of fear and foreboding, but it doesn't give them the last word. Jesus tells us later in the passage, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will not pass away." Christ's word is hope, peace, joy, and love. When we stand up and raise our heads above the things that weigh us down, we look with faith for signs that point us to in those directions. We write new headlines.





Abraham Olagbegi is writing his own headlines. Abraham is a 13-year-old from Jackson, MS. Last year he got really sick and was diagnosed with two life-threatening blood disorders. While going through treatment, including a stem-cell transplant, he was offered a wish through the Make-a-Wish Foundation. The Make-a-Wish Foundation is accustomed to making wishes happen like a trip to Disney World, or helping a child meet someone famous. But when Abraham was offered this opportunity, his greatest wish was to be able to continue to feed homeless people in his community. Before his illness, once a month Abraham and his extended family would make a hot meal and serve it in Poindexter Park in Jackson. Now that he was sick, they had to stop. His wish was to provide a hot meal once a month for a year. The Foundation granted the wish and committed to provide at least 80 hot meals on the third Saturday of every month for a year. They invited local groups to help serve. Churches and community organizations got involved. They call the monthly meal “Abraham’s Table” and cite Psalm 34:8 - “O taste and see that the Lord is good, happy are those who take refuge in him.” The headline could have read, “Teen faces life-threatening illness,” but Abraham wrote his own headline, “Teen inspires community with hope and hot meals.”

It makes me wonder what could happen if all of us, all of God’s people, all over the world stand up and lift our heads toward the signs of God’s grace and redemption in the face of fear and confusion; and act on faith that Christ and God’s kingdom is nearer than it looks, that we trust that Christ is indeed in us and has the power to cast out the fear that seeks to control us? It might be enough to give the world the hope it needs to bring the new normal we’ve been looking for, even as the chaos and foreboding events in the world continue their presence as well.

In the face of these very real challenges, we hear in this season of Advent the call to “stand up, lift your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Signs are all around us. Instead of exercising fear, God gives you the courage to exercise hope, and love, and joy, and peace. Reach out to others with these gifts and look for ways these gifts are reaching back into your life. The signs that confuse and seek to destroy will continue to be present, but God’s redemption is even more present. The gift of Advent is God’s promise that no matter how chaotic the world feels, Jesus is right, he is coming. Christ is coming soon. Amen.

