

Luke 21:25_36 Common English Bible (CEB)

25 “There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves. 26 The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. 27 Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great splendor. 28 Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.”

29 Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. 30 When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. 31 In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God’s kingdom is near. 32 I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until everything has happened. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

34 “Take care that your hearts aren’t dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day_to_day life. Don’t let that day fall upon you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth. 36 Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand before the Human One.”

The most memorable Girl Scout badge I earned was for learning the constellations. I’m pretty sure I studied them in the fall, because the constellations in these fall skies are the ones I know best - Orion, Canus Major, Taurus, the Pleiades, Cassiopeia. I have been looking to the stars for many years and I’m still fascinated and drawn in, especially when away from the city lights. I have an app on my phone which can tell me the names of planets and stars and constellations by just pointing at them with my phone. Astronomy has always amazed me. Our universe is so vast.

I’m in good company. People having been looking to the stars for millenia. The ancients knew that certain star formations appeared at expected times of the year. They were story tellers, as are we, and had wise ones, who observed the stars, their surroundings, and other people. They told stories to explain the timing of events using the appearances of constellations. They noticed their predictability and could determine the change of seasons and the timing for tilling and planting the soil and for yearly anniversaries and celebrations. These wise ones remembered things like - it was in this season of Orion that her son was born.... or the earthquake shook the village during this sky.... or that was the year the rains just wouldn’t stop and we were overwhelmed by floods.

Astrology and astronomy were connected in the ancient world (Latin: astrologia), and were only gradually separated in the 17th century.

Astronomy is a science that studies everything outside of the earth's atmosphere, such as planets, stars, asteroids, galaxies; and the properties and relationships of those celestial bodies. Astrology on the other hand, is the belief that the positioning of the stars and planets affect the way events occur on earth. They both look to the stars for guidance.

Humans have always looked for signs and noticed patterns. It's hard to accept that our lives are totally unpredictable and they really aren't. Though we can't know exactly what tomorrow holds, there are things that give us suggestions or warnings. We humans have been asking ourselves about similar choices and decisions for many, many years.... where am I going to live? What must I do to care for my family? What do I need to remember to be safe? What helps me keep my family healthy? We look to our history to learn from it, to decide whether we should do that again, because it led to prosperity, or to try something different with the hope of a new result. We look to the past, to history to guide us.

We also look to other people. What can they tell us that will help us? Can they give us clues about where we are going? Aren't we really always longing for good advice, for information that will lead us to well-being and health. Our dear ones know us well - What can they tell us about who we are and what might help us?

The ancient verse from Ecclesiastes 1:9 NRSV is so true

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
(and the line with which we are most familiar)
There's nothing new under the sun.

We look to the stars, to our history, to natural events, and to other people to guide us forward.

At the time of Jesus' birth, folks lived in Eschatological times referring metaphorically to the end of ordinary reality and the coming reunion with the Divine. When Luke was written about 60 or so years after Jesus died, many believed that Jesus the Christ would some day come again, and they also believed that time was very near. We still pretty regularly hear predictions of the "end times." Someone has a new formula and determines a date and time. Those days have come and gone and will come and go again. At the core of many of these predictions is a warning. Are we living a holy life? Or are we squandering our God given gifts? Are we letting too many distractions keep us from God? The end-time believers predict that those who are putting God first in all things are promised a glorious reunion with God.

Though it may seem out of place to have this apocalyptic scripture describing a time near the end of Jesus' life as our reading for this morning, there is still an Advent message here. What are we doing to prepare for what's next? How are we living our lives?

We certainly can name events and attitudes right now that seem to be "causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."

Because of this, we are in need of hope. We are waiting expectantly for the coming of the holy

infant. Can we feel the nearness of God? Can we find hope in the midst of the devastation and struggle and pain and catastrophe that we see around us? Can we see the world and our fellow brothers and sisters through Advent eyes? Can we hear and respond with words of comfort and new hopeful possibilities? Can we be alert to the many signs of hope?

Just as Jesus implies -

One of the ancient signs of hope is the fruitfulness of fig trees. Fig trees are right there in the beginning of the Bible, when Adam and Eve suddenly discover they are naked, after eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they cover themselves in fig leaves. Fig trees can live hundreds of years and are some of the oldest living things on the planet.

The fruit of the fig tree is often symbolic of blessings and prosperity in the scriptures. Old Testament prophets spoke of the hope of grape vines and fig trees.

Todd Weir reminds us that

Jesus speaks of fig trees three times in Luke's Gospel. In each case he spoke of the importance of tending the fig tree, being patient for its fruit to come, and working towards bearing fruit in our **own** actions. In today's parable, Jesus uses the fig tree to note that we must be patient... The rest for our souls and peace in the world we long for does not come quickly. So we have to be watchful, paying attention for signs of hope... 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 the kingdom of God is near." (Todd Weir)

Earlier this year I planted a Mission fig tree because Al loves figs. Now, I don't have a particularly green thumb. Most of my successful plants are succulents. But I understand figs are pretty hardy. We shall see how it weathers this cold season and whether it sprouts anew in the spring. It is certainly getting a good amount of TLC. Only time will tell if this tree will be a sign of good things to come. Jesus points to fig trees.... and all trees as signs of seasonal new life.

Yes, everywhere we turn we have evidence of our frightening times - poverty, drought, war, disease, climate change. People struggle with greed, addiction, mental illness, and misplaced priorities. Today, we are reminded to stay alert. To be careful to avoid being overwhelmed with distractions. Despite all that seems to be falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world, we long for hope... we need the promise of the fig tree. We wait for the Christ child to come. So, we move into this Advent time to prepare and to notice Signs of hope -

- * the rising of the sun brings daily hope.
- * The beauty all around us... even in a tenacious plant growing through a crack in the sidewalk.... suggests hope.
- * The fact that we get a fresh start, every day, no matter what happened yesterday. - offers hope.
- * there are thousands of examples of generosity and kindness that we hear about or

read about every day. Many people give of themselves for others. For example, I love the recent story about a local woman who organizes folks to give clothes and food and hair cuts to the homeless. These acts reflect hope.

* All those willing to learn and grow and try new things... this gives me immense hope.

* people step forward after a crisis to offer assistance and hope.

* Children.... their smiles.... and their silly giggles. Their hugs. Their questions and curiosity. Children and young people give me bucket loads of hope.

All these examples of hope and way more than I can even name, they also point to the nearness of God....for all is holy.

It is Advent, and time to be vigilant and watchful for light shining in the darkness.

We have lit our candle of hope this morning, and during this season, it is our job to protect and nourish the flame. Hope creates true healing and real changes in our lives. Hope is like planting and tending a fig tree, paying attention and being patient that we may reap a lifetime of good fruit. (Todd Weir)

Yes, there are many scary possibilities out there. But most people have good hearts. They are kind and loving and generous and compassionate. During this Advent season, we pray to be made new and await the wondrous, miraculous coming of the tiny babe who will become the Christ.... today we look around and notice the signs in nature and in each other that point us toward God.

Luke wrote, "There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars." May we stay alert and live fully into God's hope this Advent season!