

An Advent meditation delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent 1, December 2, 2012, dedicated to Aaron Morton-Wilson, searcher and seeker of wonders and miracles.

“Prophets Know Where To Look”

Luke 21:25-36

**(Part I of V in the Sermon Series,
“Christ is Coming”)**

I’ve never been one who believed that people are any good at seeing signs of what comes next. Truth be told, most of us have no idea what a fig tree in bloom portends—it might be that the summer is already here, but it just might be that the next cold snap will take all its leaves. It might be that the kingdom of God is here, but it is just as likely that, for whatever reason personal or worldwide, we fervently hope that God is about to come and sort it all out for us, so we don’t have to do it for ourselves...or even for each other.

So I find it difficult to know what to do with the concreteness of the Advent readings. I mean, is Christ really just behind the next cloud on the horizon, and if he is, what am I supposed to do with the roast I just put in the oven? Am I to worry anymore about the upcoming operation? Do I really have to care about the young girl I saw on the side of the road last week with a cartoon-character hat on and a sign that said, “I am homeless. Will trade good karma for help; anything will do.”

When I see scenes like this I wonder three things. First, have I been able to help just one person avoid the desperation and confusion which must swirl around this young woman’s life? Second, I wonder, if this is one of the signs of the end about which Jesus spoke. Will, ‘anything do’, to convince us that our Lord and the redemption he supplies will truly be found at the next intersection of our road? And third, where is a prophet when I need one! I looked backward and turned to Martin Luther.

In 1521, 491 years ago, Martin Luther raised his own questions of signs in his sermon, “Exhortation To Bear With the Weak”, he writes,

“We should be careful, therefore, to note whether the signs are being fulfilled now, or have been or will be in the future. I do not wish to force any one to believe as I do; neither will I permit anyone to deny me the right to believe that such is the case”. He goes on to note that there has “never been such building and planting”, such “gluttonous and varied eating and drinking”, such “wearing apparel has reached its limit in costliness” and “who has ever heard of such commerce as now encircles the earth?”ⁱ

Of course, each of Luther’s “signs” are medieval. Still, rearrange a couple of assumptions and modernize the language, and they don’t seem too far off from the surge of reality shows demonstrating our era of obnoxious over eating and over spending; or our present day dilemma of overpopulation and urban sprawl; or the unchecked appetite for consumerism and oil that is leading to the depletion of the resources of both people and planet. Even our modern worries about the effects of globalization are easily recognized in his theme. Could these be the signs of the prophets from the first days and up through the ages, now re-presented for in our own time?

Remembering he is ushering what we refer to as the Protestant Reformation, Luther continues for 20 more thick paragraphs of his some twenty- page sermon, addressing the Demon Pope sitting on the throne of Jesus and of storms and tempests that “come ever more frequently now”ⁱⁱ and have even drawn up horrid beasts from the depths. His conclusion: he affirms the first of Jesus’ words from Luke have come true—the signs are here, and most of us have not noticed them. The second part of Jesus’ words have now been proclaimed. It only remains for us to heed Jesus’ advice. So I guess some things never change.

Last week I listened to a radio interview of NASA Astrobiologist David Morrison. He has made it his mission to answer questions from people concerned about the ‘Mayan Cataclysm’ as predicted across the internet. The sad part was that

two-thirds of the people sending him inquiries are children worried about the end of the world. Some are very poignant like the young girl who wanted to know when she should put her only friend (her cat) to sleep, so that it wouldn't have to suffer in the approaching apocalypse. It was clear in the interview that Morrison is a caring and compassionate man with wise answers...one might even say, prophetically. And just for the record, as Pastor Tim and David Morrison remind us, for those familiar with the Mayan Cataclysm, "...Christmas will come this year. The planet Nibiru doesn't exist, and there is no correlation between the end of the calendar and the end of the world — the calendar would simply start over."iii

Apparently whether the concern is the 16th century's preoccupation with costly apparel or the 21st century's obsession with books, movies and blogs on the predictive power of television, complete with prophets saying they speak with the dead or adhere to ancient aboriginal calendars—the problem of brokenness remains. It is still up to us to embrace how Advent calls us to struggle with whether, or to what degree, brokenness is God's problem soon to be fixed, or ours.

Which returns me to my other concern as I looked out the passenger window of my brand new car sitting at the stoplight next to the overly slender girl wearing the strange cap: what have I done and what is God doing, to make hope stronger than despair in her life and in the lives of those of us who are most visibly broken? And with this wondering, our Advent season is at once colossally obscure and inestimably intimate. The scriptures we ponder during the four weeks before Christmas speak of signs more vast than the sun, moon and stars. They beg questions about the changes delivered by huge disasters like hurricane Sandy, yet those same readings also dwell on hopes as particular as those a young couple have for a warm place to spend the night, or those a poor young woman has for how she will receive her next meal, for which she feels she has nothing to offer in return but good Karma.

Advent is often said to be about waiting—waiting on the birth of the savior, waiting on the coming of the new creation. But Advent for many is also about their inability to wait any longer. For

some, the winds have already taken their homes; the waters have already washed their possessions away.

If, as Luther told his parish 500 years ago, the signs are already here and Christ is just behind the next cloud in the sky, then there really is no more cause for being patient. God is here; therefore, we can consider ourselves already to be about the work of the kingdom. There is no need to wait.

Knowing all this helped me reach out to that young homeless woman, right? It gave me the courage to quit waiting for God (or somebody else—maybe even she, herself) to rescue her, right? It encouraged me to roll down my automatic window and hand her the last 10 dollar bill in my pocket that day?

I wish I could say, “Yes it did”. But I am sure you won’t be shocked to find that Advent did not have that effect on me—nor did it help her cause at all. I could not bear to even catch her eye, let alone offer her even the slightest token of hope for a future in which God reigns supreme and there is no need for her (or me) to be “weighed down with drunkenness, dissipation, and the worries of this life”. (Luke 21:34b) I pray next time I will make a different choice.

There are those who claim to be “gurus” of cosmological signs. Some do this with science, like those now meeting at the international summit on global warming. Others do this with ancient calendars, tarot cards, or pearls of Old Testament scripture strung together along 19th century chains of interpretation. Such things attempt to make grand statements about the end of the world. They seek to prove what they think needs to be said so that something can be done about it before it is too late; but even predictions grounded and verifiable fall upon deaf ears.

Take for instance, the fact that the first ship to cross the Arctic Circle just completed its journey two weeks ago—the barrier of solid ice no longer impedes the voyage of giant tankers. Many shipping companies are looking forward to the bundle of money they plan to make now that they no longer have to go around the long way to Asia. On the other hand, there is also now no solid ice which polar

bears –rely on in this once frozen world for sustenance and shelter. Is this a sign that the end of the world is on its way?

Most of us would probably say “No” to this question. The melting ice caps are too big—too far removed from our daily experience. But this is NOT the case with the signs we encounter in our personal lives. They are harder to deny. The truth is, it is easier to be in denial about the rising sea levels and the melting ice packs, than it is to deny that a person along the side of the road, just inches from our car window, needs help from us. But before we give in to this hook, line and sinker, maybe we need to consider something. Maybe you and I are the sign for the perils that wrap themselves around the world. Maybe hope is real and Christ’s return is truly imminent -- for good or less-than-good....maybe we are their only sign.

The “signs in the sun, the moon and the stars and... the distress among nations confused by the roaring of the [newly melted] sea and the [rising] waves” (Luke 21:25) may not affect your Advent or mine; but it is my prayer that we will take part in Christ’s presence this year by removing our blinders and investing in the signs that are in our midst. It is true that ‘anything will do’ if given in the spirit of the Living and Still to Come Christ, who gave his all so that fewer and fewer children will have to beg in the streets for their next meal.

Advent is about knowing now that you and I have something more to give than good karma. Prophets through the ages have pointed us in the right direction – to the star that leads us forward in dark of night and dark nights of the soul.

Our gift is that a little child, once given to a broken world, is still being born into it by every act of kindness in which we engage, so that this world may heal and God’s hope be made real. Jesus comes to us again this day - present in the Eucharist – in the breaking of the bread, his body-- in the pouring out and taking in. These are all a gift to restore us; a gift to sustain us; a gift to open our eyes and our heart to God’s waiting world. May it be so, Amen.

ⁱ Martin Luther, "Exhortation to Bear with the Weak," Lectionary Central, <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/advent2/Luthergospel.html>, (November 27, 2012). [Original Source: Church Postil of 1521, (Advent 2nd Sunday)].

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ NPR Staff, Neal Conan Host, "NPR: Ask A NASA Astrobiologist About Dec. 21 Doomsday" <http://www.wbur.org/npr/165928588/as-dec-21-draws-nigh-the-facts-about-doomsday>. (November 26, 2012)

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