

Trinity 2, 2020

Signs of the Times

Matthew 24:32-42

St. Andrew's – Jacksonville, OR — By Fr. Bill Baker

“Learn a parable of the fig tree (Jesus instructs his disciples). When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh. So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.”

Ah...the frosty days of winter are gone, the rains are at bay and the clouds are beginning to give way to the warmth of the sun. We see new life in the buds forming on the trees in our yards signaling us to replace the warmth of our winter coats for shorts and flip-flops...ah...summer is nigh! But, should we let down our guards? Oregonians know that a sunny day in May or June does not imply that summer has arrived. We know better. All the signs may be there and we may have high hopes for summer but, with short sleeves around our shoulders and sandals on our feet, we know to carry our jackets in the car...we understand that our hope for the nice weather of summer is still an unpredictable event.

Just as the signs indicating summer's arrival are fickle, so too are the signals pointing to Christ's return. We must always remember that no man knows the day nor the hour of Christ's second coming. So, why does Christ tell us what the signs will be? What difference is it suppose to make if we are not to know when the day of judgment comes? We'll get to that in a moment.

Now, our reading in the 24th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew begins after much discussion has already taken place between Jesus and His disciples. During their conversation Jesus is asked by them, *“What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world”* (Matthew 24:3)? Inquiry minds want to know and if we admit it...so do we. And Jesus does give an answer but the answer is not definitive but allusive and subjective.

Jesus warns that many will come in His name, professing to be the Christ with the ability to deceive even the elect. There will be wars and rumors of wars, nation shall rise against nation and there will be

famines and pestilences and earthquakes over all the earth. And Christians shall be delivered unto affliction and even death. Many will be offended and hate one another and immorality, injustice and evil shall thrive...love shall be exchanged for a lie.

Can we not attest to these things in these days? We can! A Siberian cult leader in Russia at this moment has a massive following that believe he is the reincarnated Christ. And in Christianity Today magazine is an article reporting that top rabbinical leaders in Jerusalem are proclaiming that the long awaited Messiah, prophesied of in the Tanakh (Jewish Old Testament), has arrived and will be made known to the world very soon.

And wars and threats of wars are so common today that we hardly notice the news stories as we wait patiently for the weather update.

Of course we are all aware of the current pestilence that has changed our current worldly behaviors. Covid-19 has not only affected our health but has also sent our worldly economies into a downward spiral.

We are also experiencing some of the largest swarms of locust ever recorded. They are so large that their normal migration routes are changing and destroying agriculture that, in the past, has had no concern for these voracious insects.

And what about earthquakes? Are there more of them? Are they increasing in intensity? Well, not really. Equipment upgrades and the proliferation of recording sights have given more accurate numbers though. The USGS states that records beginning in 1900 have shown that the world should expect to see 16 major earthquakes a year (those over 7.0 on the richter scale). In the last 44 years these averages have only be exceeded 11 times.

Deceivers, wars, pestilences, earthquakes were not uncommon events in the early days of the church and nor are they now. So why did Jesus tell his disciples what to look for in the last days if these end times events were not going to be so different from what they were already experiencing? Jesus only told the disciples there would be famines, pestilences and earthquakes in diverse places...that wars would continue to be a fact of life and that antichrists would not give up their efforts to turn hearts away from the true Messiah. In other words, Jesus

is letting us know that things will not be so much different than what we are already experiencing.

Matthew 24 speaks of the end times and we can definitely see the resemblance of our Lord's words in our current times. But this has been the focus of every generation within the Christian community since the time of the apostles and for good reason...may we never be so comfortable in our worldly affairs that God is reduced to a subordinate position in our lives. In every century since our Lord's ascension we have asked, how much more pain must we endure before our Lord returns? *"If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?"* Well, its not for us to know the day or the hour. Our calling is to trust in the Lord whose ways are not our ways, whose justice is ultimately purifying, whose love is not only unfathomable but unconquerable. Is this the end? Maybe. Sure seems to add up. Maybe not. Every generation could and has made the same claims to our Lord's second coming. The purpose of our Lord's discourse with his apostles is not to make people experts on end-time prophecy, but to keep us in a prepared state spiritually, to continue in virtuous lives obeying Christ's commandments.

The point of Matthew's words in today's lesson is to balance what we learn and witness in our daily lives by the words of Holy Scripture. Being guided by the Holy Spirit, God has given us the power to resist the temptations of extremism and hold out for the glory of his expected return...whenever that may be. We do not have to understand all things, we do not have to know all things and we do not have to be decisive against our brethren concerning issues that may be clouded in deceit. We have only to love one another and resist evil and to live our lives as though the Lord's return is imminent, for if he does not come to us while we live, surely we will go to him upon our last breath.

If the sign of the times is chaos for the worldly, then the sign of the times for Christians is a continued journey within the arms of God. And so it is Faith and hope bound together resting in the love of God where we find truth and where we can be at peace. Upon our entry into the Promised Land we will find our faith and hope satisfied with the reward of eternal love and joy.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.