

There Will Be Signs

By: Douglas Forrester

Crozet United Methodist Church

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Luke 21:25-36

“There 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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be 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.”

I have yet to see the movie *2012*, but I am familiar with it, particularly because it purports to deal with a topic that has been on the minds of many people lately: the end of the world. According to various sources, December 21 in the year 2012, is understood to be the end-date of a 5,125-year-long Mayan calendar, so it is believed by some that cataclysmic events will happen on that day. This assumption may derive in part from archaeoastronomical speculation, interpretations of mythology, numerology, or supposed prophecies from extraterrestrial beings.¹

The movie shows what those cataclysmic events might look like. My original plan was to show you the teaser trailer this morning, but I thought better of it. It is pretty intense. So instead, I offer you this narrative description of it as it happened:

There is a solar eclipse, lightning, riots, earthquakes, sky filled with birds, meteors, more earthquakes, complete destruction of Vatican City, fires, giant chasms, refugees, one of the continents appearing to snap in half, more giant chasms, collapsing skyscrapers, fire and dust storms, megatsunamis, collapsing Washington Monument, another megatsunami, where the USS John F. Kennedy rolls over on the White House. All in two minutes and forty-nine seconds.

Pretty scary, right? Yet, consider this morning’s text: T

There 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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of

¹ “2012” in *Wikipedia*. I am so sorry, but really, where else are you going to go for this kind of stuff?

what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken, the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. until all things have taken place, and Heaven and earth will pass away.

All in eleven verses. And this is in the Bible!

So, if even in our own scriptures we cannot escape this talk of cataclysmic events, perhaps we should consider what all of this means.

On February 24, 2004, Shrove Tuesday for that year, which means it was the last day before the beginning of the penitential season of Lent which would begin the next day on Ash Wednesday. I was in Richmond, on my way to have dinner with a friend in Richmond, after picking up some curriculum. I chose to turn down a road that I did not normally take to get to my friend's house. I regret that decision because almost six years later, I remain convinced that had I been on any other road that evening, I most likely would not have had a driver run a stop sign and total my car. Granted, it was a '98 Ford Escort station wagon with 90,000 miles on it, so it probably could have been totalled by going through a car wash, but still.

I remember in that awful moment when the impact occurred, when the airbags inflated and the windshield cracked from one side to the other, in that dreamlike way that everything seems to happen in slow motion having this clear and lucid thought: "This cannot be happening. I have dinner plans, and I have to preach tomorrow night." It sounds crazy, but there you have it: *Nothing disruptive or tragic can happen to me. I have plans*, as if God only allows disruption to occur in the lives of those who made the mistake of leaving an opening on their calendars.

The God revealed in this morning's text is a God who *intervenes*, a God who even intrudes upon our lives. This is not the god of deist theology, who designed and created the world and then let it be, without miracles or prophecy. The God who Luke describes and Jesus points towards in this morning's text is one who meets us, even *collides with* our lives, whether we expect it or not.

I wonder how often it happens to us that we lose our ability to be surprised by God? I wonder how often we have the prayer life of the Christian and, at the same time, the expectations of the deist? I wonder how often we are with God as I was in my automobile accident, ignoring, resisting, or denying God's intervention in our lives for no other reason than the fact that God's intrusion in our lives is not a part of our plans?

One of our United Methodist bishops tells of a friend who is a tremendously creative biblical interpreter. The bishop once asked him what was the most difficult challenge in biblical interpretation? Is it mastering Greek and Hebrew? Keeping abreast of the latest trends in biblical scholarship?

His friend replied that, "No. The greatest challenge is not to let your presuppositions, your expectations for what the text says or cannot say get in the way of the revelation of a living

God. The most difficult thing is not to stifle God's sovereign freedom with your careful study of the biblical text.”²

The bishop goes on to say that “the main difference between a living, true God and a dead, false god is that a dead, false god will never surprise you.”³ Do we still believe in a God of surprises? Does the church still believe that God is a God of surprises, or are we too willing to believe that our God is a “hands-off” God, or that if God is going to get involved in our realm, God will only do so within the confines of church doctrine, church polity, the church calendar, or the church budget?

In one of the new U2 songs, there is a line that goes, “Stop helping God across the road like a little old lady.” Is it true, that we somehow think that God is feeble, predictable, and in need of *our help*, or do we believe in a God who is loud and rambunctious? I have a one-year old daughter named Claire who is just about to do all of her walking on her own. I also have a completely decorated, lighted Christmas tree in my living room. The result of this is that I love, love, love coming to church. It is the longest amount of unbroken time I have had to do one thing since last Sunday.

When people find out that I have a one-year-old at home, they always ask the same thing: *Is she into everything?* and my answer is YES! YES! YES! I am closing doors to stairways and picking up chokeables off the floor *in other people's houses*. *Yes! She is in to EVERYTHING!*

And sisters and brothers, our God is a God who is into everything. Maybe this is why the God of all creation comes to earth as an infant, and perhaps this is why we have the season of Advent, a season whose very name means *coming*, a reminder that our God is an intrusive God who *was*, who *is*, and *who* is to come.

And we hear these verses like “There 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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken,” but he goes on to say, “when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” It means that God is not removed from our sufferings. It means that in God, we are never alone, it means that the difficulties of our blessings and our burdens and even the burden of our blessings can be a means by which God can come into our lives and a sign that God is, and those difficulties, that pain, that sense of foreboding, and everything seems wrong in the sun, moon, the stars, on earth, between nations, and even in the roaring of the sea, it is a reminder that the day of God is coming, that the day is coming when God will make sense of this life and these present sufferings.

Jesus is talking about change in this text, he is talking about how the presence of God coming into our lives can be a difficult thing, because it shakes us, transforms us, critiques our assumptions, sometimes knocks us off our foundations, tears down those easy walls of rationalization we sometimes build around ourselves. Drawing near to God means that we learn

² Willimon, William, “Luke 21:25-36” in Pulpit Resource, Logos Productions, November 29, 2009.”

³ Ibid.

to see ourselves and our neighbors in a new way. It means change, and change is hard, but just because things are hard, it does not mean that God is absent. In fact, this text argues that the opposite is true.

Simply put, when someone says to me, “I tried Christianity for a while, but my life did not get any easier.” I wonder when Christianity ever made them that exact promise.

Preparation is really all this text asks of us. Jesus says, ‘Be on guard...be 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.’ Watch, don’t worry, be clear-headed, be alert, and pray. Not exactly a bad way to spend Advent, is it? Preparing, watching, and being expectant that the intrusive God of life is still in our midst, still working in our lives, and that the pain we feel today could really be the birth pangs of redemption and the newness of life that in God’s love will never end.

In the midst of suffering, there is hope. In the midst of all of the things that we cannot understand, there is the love and presence of God. Jesus looks at all the hurt and confusion of our lives and says to us, “Get ready! Watch! Brace yourselves! Because you don’t want to miss what our God is going to do next!”

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.