

There are signs all around us—can you see them? You go anywhere and what're they playing? Holiday music, right? And noticed anything different about your neighborhood? Aren't there lights up on the houses? And is it just me, or did it seem like this year Black Friday was bigger than ever? Everywhere, there are signs of what's coming—you really can't miss 'em!

I remember one sign I had as a kid. Every year, about this time, my Mom got me one of those Advent calendars—y'know, it'd be covered with 25 doors to open, one for each day on the countdown to Christmas. Of course, the best calendars came with a chocolate behind each door. There was one year though when mine didn't come with chocolates—and boy, let me tell you, my Mom never made that mistake again. Anyway, that was my annual sign that the Savior was on His way. Every day, I got a reminder that it wouldn't be long now until He arrived. With each chocolate, I was getting that much closer—and believe me, that was a sign I couldn't miss. Except, today Jesus tells us we still do.

This morning, when Jesus prophecies what the signs will be for when He comes back, He tells us that they're not quite what we'd expect. The signs that He describes aren't as nice as chocolate Advent calendars, or holiday music, or Christmas lights, or Black Friday blowouts. No, just listen again to the signs that Jesus mentions:

- Signs in the sun, moon, and stars
- Then, distress of nations
- The roaring of the sea and waves
- People fainting with fear and foreboding at what's happening to the world
- The powers of the heavens being shaken.

Wow, kinda scary, don'tcha think? Like something right out of those apocalyptic movies, isn't it? Maybe, like me, you're thinking, *Really, Jesus! These are the kinds of signs you wanna give us? This is how you'll announce your salvific arrival?* Who would've guessed the signs for His blessed coming would be the likes of these?

I love that one Far Side cartoon—maybe you remember that comic by Gary Larson. Well, there's this geeky kid trying to get into the Midvale School for the Gifted. He looks studious, with a book under one arm. But with the other arm, he's leaning with all his might, straining as hard as he possibly can to push open the door. All the while, there's this sign right there that says in these big bold letters . . . “PULL.” Anyway, that's us. Today, Jesus points out that we're not so good at reading signs.

If we went around the room and took a survey, we'd come to find out just how true this is. What I mean is, if we asked you when you've felt closest to God, what would you say? You might say, when you're right here in worship—and for that, I'd absolutely give you a gold star. No doubt, that's true. Or you might say, when you're doing personal Bible study, or deep in prayer, or visiting an awe-inspiring church building. And that'd be true too. Some of you might even say when your child hugs you or your spouse squeezes your hand, or when you witness a stunning sunset or stroll through the woods, or when someone unexpectedly does something nice for you. And surely, there's some truth to that too. BUT, how many of you would say that astronomical signs . . . or the distress of nations . . . or the roaring of the sea . . . or people fainting with fear . . . or the powers of the heavens being shaken would make you feel close to God? Do any of *those* signs give you the warm fuzzies just thinking about how Jesus is almost here? Might you even, dare I say, feel just the opposite? But here we're pushing, and Jesus says, “Pull.”

Now, those are ugly, nasty things that sound like no fun at all. We would never think to call those signs of something so wonderful as our Lord's homecoming. Nevertheless, those are the signs, Jesus says. That's how we know that Christ is entering our atmosphere, touching down on planet earth. Jesus calls them *signs*.

But if we searched the gospels, you know what else Jesus calls them? He also calls such trials and tribulations by another word—*crosses*. You see, hardship and persecution are crosses that we bear. And if He calls them crosses, well, you and I know a thing or two about crosses.

We know about the cross of Christ. Betrayed by a disciple, condemned by the Sanhedrin, sentenced by Pilate, Jesus couldn't miss those signs. The writing was on the wall—the only thing in His future was the cross. It looked as if all was coming to an end! This was it! Curtains! *Finito! Sayonara!* At least that's how it would've looked to anyone who was there. But somehow, strangely, Jesus didn't act like *anything* was over. No He withstood, endured, persisted, like He knew there was more to come. Even through the flogging, the cross-bearing, the crucifixion, Jesus still held His head high. He acted as if this wasn't really the end, but just the beginning—like His redemption was drawing near. What did Jesus know that nobody else knew? Well, three days later, the cat would be let out of the bag. Come to find out, a new never-ending chapter for God and His creation was being written.

What crosses are you carrying right now? What painful burdens have been placed on your back? What might look like signs to you that all is lost? That there's no hope anymore? That your world is over? Finances? . . . Parenting? . . . Illness? . . . Loss? . . . Change? . . . Work? . . . Failure? . . . Well, these signs, these crosses, aren't it. No, they are the start of bigger and better things just waiting for you; of the blessings God has in store; of your bright future just up ahead! At least that's what Jesus says in today's Gospel.

Notice what He doesn't say about the fig tree. When Jesus uses it as an illustration, He doesn't talk about how it sheds its leaves which tells you that the dead of winter is on its way. Instead, He says, "As soon as you see leaves on a fig tree, you know that summer is almost here!" Not winter, mind you, but SUMMER! And elsewhere Jesus describes His arrival in terms of a woman in labor. When a mother goes through the pain and travail of childbirth, it might feel like the end of the world. But soon enough, that'll all melt away when she holds the newborn in her tender arms. When some violent contractions rock your world, it's no doomsday but the start of the world to come. "When you see these things taking place," Jesus says, "you know that the kingdom of God is near."

That's how you are to interpret the signs, how you should understand your crosses! If you've been joined to the cross of Christ—which no doubt you have—then that means you're also joined to His resurrection! This isn't the end of the story, but just the nightfall getting us ready for the dawn of a new day; the refreshing rain right before the sun comes out; only the hunger that whets our appetite before the feast to come! That's all any of this is—no matter what you're facing right now, Easter's on its way! It's like Jesus said, "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Most of you have heard of Nelson Mandela, I'm sure. You might know that he had a bold vision of the future. Mandela saw so much oppression and cruelty all around him, and dreamed of a new era for South Africa. An era when all peoples could live in peace and every person be treated with dignity. But it seemed like that dream would never come true when Mandela faced life in prison for challenging the status quo. Anyone would've read his incarceration as a sign that this was it—just a dream. And you would've thought, with each passing year behind bars, that Mandela himself would've become discouraged too, like it was all over. But for 27 years, when Mandela looked outside his prison cell, he held his head up high, waiting for his redemption to draw near. He had heard about Jesus and he knew that the cross wasn't a dead end.

The day indeed came when the barbarism of apartheid was finally over, and Mandela walked out of that jail a free man. But as his future opened up in front of him, it became even greater than he could've imagined. Not only did he see his dream become a reality, but he was elected the first black president of South Africa. In his autobiography, Mandela writes, "I have found that one can bear the unbearable if one can keep spirits strong even when the body is being tested. Strong convictions are the secret of surviving deprivation. Your spirit can be full even when your stomach is empty. I always knew that some day I would once again feel the grass under my feet and walk in the sunshine as a free man. I am fundamentally an optimist."—And here's where I want us to pay close attention; really listen to what he says—"Part of being an optimist," Mandela goes on, "is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward." . . . Let me repeat, "Part of being an optimist is keeping one's *head pointed toward the sun*".

12.09.2018
Second Sunday in Advent
Luke 21:25-36

Rev. David V. Miller
Lutheran Church of the Ascension
Atlanta, GA

My dear sign readers, my fellow cross-bearers, Mandela's optimism was enough to keep his head pointed toward the sun. But, as inspiring as those words are, all the optimism in the world couldn't guarantee his release from prison. While Mandella had optimism, you and I have something greater, a sure thing—we have *hope!* All signs, all crosses, point to the hope of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who cannot fail us—"Heaven and earth will pass away," He says, "but my words [my promises] will never pass away." Yes, hope is what keeps our heads pointed toward the sun—or as Jesus put it, straightens us up and keeps our heads raised, because our redemption *is* drawing near.