

**Signs of the Times**  
**Preached by**  
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**December 2, 2018**  
**The Lord's Supper**

**For Reflection:**

*No natural exhalation in the sky,  
 No scope of nature, no distemper'd day,  
 No common wind, no custom'd event,  
 But they will pluck away his natural cause  
 And call them meteors, prodigies and signs,  
 Abortives, presages and tongues of heaven.*

- King John 3.4, William  
 Shakespeare

**Psalm for the Day:** Psalm 25: 1-10 (adapted)

To you, O Lord, we lift up our souls.

O my God, in you we trust; do not let us be put to shame; do not let our enemies exult over us.

Make us to know your ways, O Lord; teach us your paths.

Lead us in your truth, and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation; for you we wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of our youth or our transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember us, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

The Lord leads the humble in what is right.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,

for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

**Gospel Reading :** Luke 21: 25-36

<sup>25</sup>“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. <sup>26</sup>People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup>Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ---<sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

<sup>29</sup>Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup>as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. <sup>33</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>34</sup>“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, <sup>35</sup>like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>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.”

## Sermon: Signs of the Times

Blood moons, eclipses, shooting stars and comets, house-sized meteors skimming the earth's atmosphere, earthquakes and hurricanes, fires and floods. Nations overwhelmed trying to respond to natural disasters. The proliferation of weapons that give us nightmares. Nearly 70 million people forcibly moved from their homes world-wide. Mass shootings. Cries for civility in public discourse and a return to cooperation and values of our better angels—that seem to be outdated cries for a culture possibly alive in the era of black and white movies. They certainly are events and conditions of great concern, but if they are signs peculiar to our time, that remains to be seen.

Such signs have been seen and such messages preached again and again across the millennia both before and since Jesus' time. To be truthful, they have been the signs of every era of human dwelling on earth. In other eras, preached to people, creatures with much more respect for the power of creation and its signs and wonders than in our own age (although the events we refer to as natural disasters seem to be re-charging our respect), preached to people oppressed, unimaginably poor, the victims of horrific violence, and with little, if any power to change things for themselves, preached to such people a message such as this would have been one of hope—not for destruction but for the creation of a new world where that which made their lives painful at best, agony at worst, well such a message about that ending and being one with God would have been one of great hope and possibility. It was not a message of dark threat, but an announcement of their current reality with a hopeful light shining from days to come. It was a message that said endurance was a virtue with holy rewards. It was a message that encouraged people not to fall into the behaviors acceptable in their time, but that broke down human relationships and the relationships with God. It was a prayer that people have the strength to survive and the faithfulness to rise above the events and abuses around them.

The message has been abused over the years – and let's give credit or blame for that to the messengers. One abuse used was not to offer hope but to suppress rebellion in its many forms, saying this is now, but heaven will be different—a message used to enforce slavery, the suppression of people of color, people who find themselves to be in ethnic, religious or cultural minorities wherever they are and women around the world. Abuse.

Another abuse has been to persuade people that the "end-times," whatever it meant to different groups, were upon us and only those who divested of all their wealth and worldly possessions, usually in the direction of the preacher of the message, would be saved. Abuse.

Sometimes it is a message of just threat and darkness that it merely causes people to be frozen into immobility, a faithful paralysis, waiting for an inevitable end. Perhaps not so much abuse as fear-driven errors by faithful well-meaning people.

Perhaps one of the reasons these are easy roads of interpretation to go down, is that the before picture of the signs of time and tides, heaven and earth, nations and people are so clear and so accurate as to our experience and observation and the great classical art images of the Renaissance, and the after picture merely tell us we will stand before the Son of Man. Because no one has stood before the Son of Man in this life, or come back to report on the experience, we have no idea what that looks like and in fact, people are still arguing over what the title "Son of Man" means. So drama and detail at one end of the story and vague imagery at the other means our attention is drawn to the frightening piece of the story and we forget the hope and possibility at the other end.

So as not to be abusive and not to scare ourselves silly, let's take a moment with just the few final words of Jesus' preaching. <sup>36</sup>"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."

We certainly might pray and indeed give thanks that in this country we are largely spared the consequences of the violent upheavals of nature, contributed to in part by climate change. While not directly affected, many of us know and love people who have been. We might well pray to be spared being the victims of a mass shooting, knowing that in this, geography does not protect us. Most of us

are reeling from the uncivil contest our political system has become, especially in a time when we are increasingly burying the national servants who personified grace and cooperation and put nation and the public above self-service and ego.

Sometimes our experience is personal and sometimes it is vicarious through an unrelenting news cycle. In that sense, we have not escaped and we might be tempted to think our prayers have failed, not been heard, remain unanswered or receive a negative response.

Before we fall into that kind of fatalistic thinking, let us consider another way we might pray to escape these things. Let us pray for the strength not to fall into these same habits – to respond to incivility with incivility; to seek wealth as personal security against threat instead of working for the larger good; to fail to change our own habits with regard to the resources of the planet; to oppress those who are feeling the brunt of economic and cultural change in ways from which we are protected by wealth (and yes, we are wealthy), by education, by opportunity and by location by saying since their concerns are not ours the concerns don't matter—always understanding that to say someone's concerns don't matter is to say they themselves do not matter. Let us pray to rise above these behaviors and choices—not as ones who have the luxury of floating above them, but rising above the temptation to act according to the lowest common denominator in relating to our fellow humans and our God.

While it may be said that when it comes to describing the signs of the times in sky and weather, earth and sea, and that which we optimistically refer to as human civilization, have remained relatively unchanged over the millennia, there has been a definitive and world changing event since Jesus preached this sermon. Easter happened. When Easter happened all the expectations about love and hope, expectation and possibility, the power of death and the power of life over death were all upended. When Easter happened, people of faith were called and formed into the body of Christ now on earth. When Easter happened, we were made to be signs of the times. What we do, the choices we make and the way we treat all our humans and our creation are our witness proclaiming to the world an image of God's redeemed and restored creation. We may get weary and discouraged. Even with God's power in us, we will not bring all things to the fulfillment of God's vision. We will not be the Saviors of the world. The world already has a savior. But, when the day comes that we do stand before God in Christ, we shall need tremble only in awe, but not in fear.