

# **"Signs of the Time"**

## **Sermon on Sunday, March 24, 2019**

**Based on Luke 13: 1-9**

### **Dear congregation,**

In a little Georgia country church, there was a story that the older folks in town loved to tell again and again, laughing over it, savoring and embellishing it. The tale involved a certain Sunday night in October of 1938. It was a time when the rumblings of WW II could already be felt, a time of anxieties and fears. Evening prayer services were in full swing when a man named Sam, a member of the congregation who lived down the road from the church, charged into the prayer meeting trembling with fear and excitement. Finally gaining the breath to speak, he shouted, "Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships! Some of `em have already landed in New Jersey!" The preacher halted in mid-sentence; the congregation stared at Sam blankly. "I s-s-swear," he stammered, now a little unsure of his footing. "I h-h-heard it on the radio."

As it turned out, what Sam had heard, was Orson Welles's now infamous Mercury Theater radio production of *War of the Worlds*, but no one in the congregation was aware of that at the time. For all they knew, the world outside was coming to a flaming end. The little flock looked apprehensively at the preacher, but the man in cloth was mute and indecisive, scared to take a stance, petrified by the possibility of embarrassment. For sure, it was the first time his sermon had been disrupted by interplanetary invasion and he didn't know what to make of it. Finally, one of the oldest members of the congregation, a red-clay farmer of modest education, stood up, gripped the pew in front of him with his large, callused hands, and said, "I `speck what Sam says ain't completely true, but if it is true, we're in the right place here in church. Let's go on with the meetin'." And so they did.

Spaceships landing in New Jersey... Signs of the end of the world... It would be easy for us to dismiss these ideas as the result of a naïve brand of religious expectation that to snobby northeasterners seems to grow particularly strong in the old south. But snobbishness will never lead us to a better understanding of Jesus. The old farmer sized it all up, measured it against his rough-hewn view of providence, and instinctively made the right decision. It is better to be in church praising God than running around like a chicken without a head.

According to Jesus, most of us, including all kinds of educated people, including clergy and bishops, are not nearly as astute as this farmer in reading the signs of the times, discerning what matters and what doesn't, figuring out what's happening in God's world. He admonished them: "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why don't you know how to interpret the present time?" And I could hear him say to us, "You people know how to turn on the weather channel and predict a snowstorm two days before it arrives, but you miss some of God's important signs." Well, I hear Jesus' warning, but I also have to ask myself how we can read the signs of our times. Not because there are no signs, but because there are so many signs. It's quite confusing, so much information, so many serious reports coming our way. In just one week we heard about everything from a mass shooting in New Zealand to the Brexit negotiations stalling again, to the Mueller report finally being submitted. And then there is any amount of other chatter on the news channels that reaches our ears: opinions, analysis, rumors, scores, entertainment and money. If you can make sense of it all, please let me know.

The people at Jesus' time were not subjected to the kind of over-stimulation that we have gotten used to. The news cycle back then was not 24 hours but more like 24 weeks! The disasters that people mention in this passage were most likely the talk of town. So, people thought deeply about those unfortunate souls who were crushed and died when the tower in Siloah collapsed. And they had time to ponder the bloody massacre ordered by Pilate. How could that happen? Why did it happen? But interestingly, Jesus does not see God at hand in these incidents, at least not in the way people thought. He said repentance is something everybody ought to embrace. We should all engage in the renewal of our minds, the changing of negative ways, not only when we are shaken by a disaster. Instead of panic he prescribes patience.

To sharpen our vision, Jesus tells a parable about an orchard owner who was frustrated by a barren fig tree and ordered the gardener to cut the tree down. "Sir," pleads the gardener, "let's nurture it, care for it and give it one more year." *That's it.* That is the sign of the times. Not invaders from space, not the crashing of Boeing 737 max, not wars or earthquakes, not Brexit, but the gracious and patient hand that reaches out to halt the ax, the merciful gesture resisting all that would give up on the barren and the broken, the merciful voice that says, "Let's give this hopeless case one more year." Can we make this a sign of our times? Isn't Jesus almost saying here: it's in the eye of the beholder how you interpret your times!!! It is up to you, and with some spiritual maturity you will give yourself and the world a little bit more time and nurture it with care, and see what the results will be!!!

Jesus could have talked about the young apple tree that sits in my garden at home on Tanglewood Drive. A friend gave it to me as a housewarming gift in 2005. So far, it has produced on average 1.5 apples per season. This spring I will find myself again in that patch of land, trying to prune this dwarf apple tree in a different way, perhaps giving it some cross-fertilizing fruit-tree company or using some other tricks.

Clearly, the finish line of this gospel passage is very comforting: "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." This tells me that God is a lot more patient with people - with the faults and imperfections of human nature- than we are. Even if a person is out of luck and out of confidence and maybe guilty of certain character faults or the victim of painful inner rumblings, God will say, "Let's give this tree a little bit more time and nurture it, it may come along." That's the definition of grace - undeserved second and third chances. What's more, we don't know what the gardener in this metaphor will do if the tree won't produce in the following year. Will the gardener really cut it down or will he say, "Let's give it yet another year..."?

It's within the power of God the gardener to extend grace as often as necessary. And God is generous. We could read this parable also as a metaphor for the struggles of our world, threatened by climate change and so any other things. God is telling us: do your stuff, people; do what you can; be gentle to mother nature; change your ways, nurture the environment, and then give it some more time. The signs of alarm in this gospel passage are tempered by God's patience. "Give this tree another year," God says. It will figure out the signs of the time. It will adapt. It will grow. And so it will, if we manage to change our ways and use a gentle, persistent, patient approach, not action without patience and not patience without meaningful action.

**Amen.**