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A Sign of Hope for the End of Days

Luke 21:25-36, emended

[Jesus is speaking.] “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 Jesus 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 does not 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.”

We are living in the end times, there is no mistaking it. Of course, we’ve always been living in the end times, perhaps since the dawn of time. We were all born with a single inevitable truth before us: we will die. The earth was created with a single, inevitable truth: it will not last forever. The ever-expanding universe seems to have the same truth embedded in it: it will one day cease to be. It is the second law of thermodynamics, the tendency toward disorder—entropy. Nothing exists forever because entropy increases and takes the energy from the system. The universe’s existence foretells its ending. So, if the end is inevitable, if the end has always been inevitable, how do we live in these end times? After all, the signs are all around us—signs of trouble, reasons for fear, the earth shakes, the sea roars, people pass away, things we once held true pass away. We do not have to work hard to see these signs, but we are not charged to watch only for signs of decay, but also for signs of hope. Keep alert, Scripture says, to see the Child of Humanity, and stand up and be the sign of the redemption drawing near.

You may recall from a few weeks ago, when we had a similar apocalyptic text from Mark’s gospel, you may recall that the gospels written in the midst of a series of Jewish-Roman Wars. Mark’s gospel was written either during or in the immediate aftermath of

the first Revolt, but Luke's gospel seems to be penned during a period of relative, though tense, peace in between conflicts. The signs Jesus mentions are real, the conflicts, too. And for some of the early hearers of these stories, it comforted the people to hear that Jesus knew this was to come.

We, too, live in a time of distress among nations, even within our nation; we live in a time where there are signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, roaring seas, earthquakes, and other heralds of a catastrophically changing climate. We, too, are fearful from the pandemic, from crimes motivated by hate, bigotry, and racism. Our hearts are weighed down from record-high overdose deaths, unemployment, disruptions in our economy, mass influxes of refugees, from threats of arrest in Chichipate for demanding clean water and safe fishing. Does hearing these words of Jesus set our hearts at ease?

Nevertheless, Jesus says, "when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

We know how to read the signs of our inevitable demise. But can we read the signs of our inevitable redemption? We know what fear looks like, but can we discern hope? We are on guard against death—maybe even too much—but can we, too, embrace the life that God gives us through Christ Jesus?

Oh, from the fig tree, learn its lesson. There is this children's book called *Tap the Magic Tree*. Readers are encouraged to tap the tree, to kiss its blossoms, shake the autumn leaves from its limbs, to wiggle fingers to bring on the snow, and then, to knock upon its trunk to see, "Magic—it begins again." From the tree, learn its lesson. The signs of summer aren't signs of destruction, but of a harvest to come, of sweet fruit.

Oof, this is the trickiest part. It is much, much easier to see the other kind of sign. It is easy to preach from a pulpit doom and gloom—to compel people to straighten up because judgment is coming. But, Beloved, is this what you need to hear, really? Even your enemy—the one with whom you disagree vehemently—do they need words of condemnation? You know the ones, right? The ones who think nothing of the trash that blows from their picnic basket, of drinking every last ounce of their days' water from a single-use bottle they'll throw in the trash. The ones who won't roll up their sleeves for a vaccination, or wear their mask in the store. The ones who aren't racist, but can't resist the off-color joke or the long, hate-filled diatribe. The ones who demand you agree with them, who move quickly through the world and have no time for those who need a little more time to adjust. Are they struggling to read the signs? Is it condemnation they need? Destruction?

It would be too easy to prophesy their destruction, but what sign of hope might yet convince them? The trouble is that hope is more vulnerable than despair. You know, this entropy concept. If there is no entropy, a cool building in the heat of summer stays cool. But entropy—the disorder of the system—causes heat to transfer into the building.

Cooling it is literally fighting the system, but that fight loses energy, too. Every sign of hope we might discover on the horizon of our lives will fall victim to this same system. We can say, ah! Here is a sign of hope when we note that, in the aftermath of the Kyle Rittenhouse verdict, the city of Kenosha didn't erupt into violence. But the hope dims in the light when justice is not served. Here is a sign of hope that the nations of the world have quickly identified an omicron variant, but what it might mean for us sends us back into despair. Hope is vulnerable to the same decay and disorder as anything else in our world.

There are only two answers then, Beloved. Two answers that live in tandem with one another. The first answer is this: we must become collectors of signs of hope. Enthusiasts for hope. Loyal fans. Experts on the subject. Hope in Jesus Christ, the Child of Humanity, must be the center of our existence. I believe the preponderance of evidence points toward Christ, toward the hope that saves us. There is an avalanche of hope, if we only look for it. Raise up your heads, Beloved.

But should the first answer ever prove insufficient, there is its partner: be the sign of hope. Stand up, Beloved. In a world where hope is vulnerable, you are the sign. You are the sign who collects hope like a toddler collects pebbles and twigs and pocket lint—treasures, all. There is hope in the world, and we are signs to one another, Beloved. Signs that God is working in the world to bring about not death, but life; not indifference, but love; not oppression, but liberation; not despair, but hope.

Amen.