

November 28, 2021 Advent 1

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Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

[With crossover, conversation, and quotes from Rev. Jane McBride at First Congregational Church, UCC, Minneapolis, in preparation for their sermon for this date entitled "Which Signs?". Facebook post by Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs on 11/24/21. Pastor Drew Jackson from Hope East Village, speaking at Good Shepherd New York on 12/22/20, online

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckXIQ571NFE> .

Mary Oliver's poem Messenger from the collection Thirst.]

Beloved of Christ Jesus, blessings in the name of the One who was, and the One who is, and the One who is to come. Amen.

"There will be signs" Jesus promises in this morning's Gospel passage.

Years ago I was adventuring with a couple of friends along the Pigeon River that creates the border

between the US and Canada in the arrowhead region of Minnesota, not far from Lake Superior.

We'd been exploring the backroads and portage trails, musing about the history, savoring the time together.

That had felt good during the warm afternoon,

but soon the sun was sinking quickly.

Gray dusk was upon us and we still hadn't found a place to camp.

Honestly, we were getting a little nervous.

This was before cell phones and google maps, which probably wouldn't have worked there anyway.

Our instincts helped a bit, but for me, gravel roads always make distance more confusing.

We longed for a sign, *3 miles to such and such, Camping this way*, that type of sign.

And then there it was: a sign tipped ever-so-slightly along the side of the gravel road as we approached.

This was exactly what we needed!

We couldn't quite read it in the headlights, so one of my friends jumped out, adjusting the sign,

trying to make it visible enough to read in the car's beams.

Surely this sign would orient us.

I can still remember my friend squinting in the high beams,

holding up that sign,

the sign we thought would be the answer, bright and reflective, it read simply:

"YOU ARE HERE"

You should have heard our collective scream in that moment! You are here.

"There will be signs" Jesus promises in this morning's Gospel passage.

It's the start of the new church year, the beginning of Advent,

our season of preparation for the coming of Jesus...

...And the readings always surprise me.

I expect the coming of Jesus as a baby, with Mary's song capturing her hopes for this child.

I expect the prophet calling out *Prepare the way* for grown up Jesus and

this Good News so radical we can scarcely comprehend it.

We'll hear all of that and more in the coming weeks.

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we read not from the beginning of Luke's gospel, but from the end.

The coming we await in this passage is Jesus' second coming.

Jesus promises: "There will be signs..."

We're not talking about STOP signs with distinct letters and a clear meaning.

Rather, we're talking about signs of divine presence and intention.

Signs far more like, "YOU ARE HERE" randomly placed on gravel roads in the hinterlands.

Signs that by their very nature are ambiguous and mysterious.

Signs that require attention, interpretation, discernment, testing, and faith.

Similar to the readings we heard earlier in November,

the gospel on this first Sunday of Advent is in the apocalyptic genre.

Remember that the word Apocalypse literally means *un-cover, pull back the veil*.

Some are drawn to interpreting these passages in a literal way that describes the end of the world or the destruction of creation.

As if to say, the quicker Jesus comes, the less concern we should have for the that which is around us, whether that means the environment, or climate science, or COVID realities.

This religious belief for some gets played out in policy aplenty.

For me, this interpretation can be troubling on many levels.

Why would God who loves creation, who cries with the suffering of the world, seek this ending?

So, there's another read, and that's where I want to dwell today:

These passages can point not to destruction, but to transformation,

to the world becoming more fully what God intended the world to be.

In this reading, endings lead to beginnings, to birth.

And reverence for creation and humanity, is not ignored, but rather heightened.

Our passage from Luke, with the sun and the moon,

has long been read with terror, assuming extinction.

One could plug in spikes in violence or newly discovered variants sending shock waves around the world..
Some of current situations that follow suit.

But, then, right in the middle of the passage, after all those signs of distress,

Jesus points us to the humble fig tree.

“Look at the fig tree,” Jesus says, “and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves
you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.”

While it may be tempting to look for God’s power and presence in turmoil, in distress,
dear ones, the real signs of divine transformation are also small,
a budding tree, a sprouting leaf uncurling to welcome the sun.

Over the last few years, my spouse Jane has taken up photographing close up images in nature.

As we walk around the neighborhood, she’s hanging back, iphone in hand,
capturing some amazing pictures.

This has her (and the rest of us) noticing the details, including how even in late November,
you can often find the tiny buds awaiting spring.

Jane wrote recently, “I’m amazed, full of awe, each time I notice these tiny, tight bundles of potential
bravely enduring the icy fall wind,
hope and joy waiting and watching beneath the winter snow,
patiently guarding life until the conditions are right for its renewed explosion.”

Hidden in plain sight, God and signs of God show up time and again:

revealed in the resilient ways of earth,
birthed in an infant boy, child of a brave peasant couple,
sheltered in the human heart, in that deep current of divine wisdom that flows within each of us,
lived out in compassion, in justice.

The signs we’re talking about here are mysterious, divinely mysterious,
and they need our attention, our interpretation, to be realized.

Reflecting on this week’s outcome of the trial of those who murdered Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia,
Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs, Director of Racial Justice at the MN Council of Churches, warned:

“Let us be careful not to use sentiments like ‘the legal system worked’
when we speak of the guilty verdicts in the case...”

Remember that without the outrage of Black folk and allies,
there would not have been charges,

there would have been no trial and
there would be no guilty verdicts.”

Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs continued, “The legal system did not work, the legal system was forced into action.”

He concluded, “Let us, with gratitude lift up those who had the courage to demand justice.”

You know: the nuance and complexity of signs is key here, for faithfulness cares enough to pay attention,
to check our assumptions, even, especially, our privilege.

This Advent, this waiting season, our focus in worship is Hope.

We can be conditioned to think of hope as optimism, or looking on the bright side.

But, friends, in times like this, let’s go deeper, for Hope is our life blood.

In a piece I heard recently, Pastor Drew Jackson spoke of “Hope in terms of longing.”

He commented how the prophets and ancients, our ancestors in the faith, imagined Hope deeply rooted in
the real pain and struggle around them.

He said, “Christian Hope is meant to be a Hope that lives in tension,

where we simultaneously hold together the pain of the world as it is and
the promise of the world as it will be.”

This season, let us look for signs of this Hope.

They are always with us.

The bud birthed in the fall,
the breath of grace in a day that is too much,
the touch of a friend,
the courage to speak truth,
the wisdom to simply listen, training your ear as Jesus.

Look for signs of this Hope: subtle, grace-filled, enduring.

Signs of Hope: right where we are.

You are here.

“Be alert,” Jesus tells them, “Be alert.”

In early Advent our posture is attention, like my good dog, Ace,

ears perked, senses keen, alert for these signs of Hope.

Poet Mary Oliver, a master of paying attention wrote in her poem “Messenger”:

“Let me keep my mind on what matters

which is my work

which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.”

Dear ones, this season of Hope, let us stand still and learn to be astonished!

Last week, Jerry Hanson died, and Friday her memorial service was held in this space.

This morning, we take time to remember Geraldine, Jerry, and to pray.

Jerry lived nearly 96 years.

The great majority of those years were spent in Albert Lea, in far southern Minnesota.

She was born and raised in Albert Lea,

living with her parents in an upstairs apartment in her grandparents' home.

Jerry met her husband Jack there in Albert Lea when they were in 9th grade.

They married after Jack returned from the Navy.

Together they raised 3 children, Jill, Tom, and Mark, and now have 6 grand kids and 12 great grandkids.

Jerry was deeply involved in the fabric of the Albert Lea community,

volunteering at the school and with the scouts,

active and always serving in their congregation, Grace Lutheran Church in Albert Lea.

Jerry was a crafter: sewing, quilting, knitting, painting.

She also loved to read, and as they retired she and Jack traveled, camped, and fished.

They moved to the Twin Cities late in 1999, and Jack passed away in 2009.

Around Hope, Jerry would come with her son and daughter in law, Tom and Sue Hanson,

and she'd sit right about there!

When those in this community die,

we remember how the same waters that first washed over them in baptism, hold them now in death.

In her death, like in her life, Jerry is held by God.

Friends, we pray at these baptismal waters, linking ourselves to God's powerful waters of promise.

Let us pray...Holy God, holy and powerful, we remember before you today our sister Jerry. We thank you for giving her to us to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth. At the waters of baptism, you welcomed her into your love. At the waters, you comforted her in times of trouble and encouraged her in delight. At these waters, you now enfold her into Jesus' death and resurrection and the promise of life everlasting. Console us who mourn and bring us together to feast with all the saints of God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.