

"Looking for Signs." Jer. 33:14-16; Ps. 25; 1-10; Luke 21:25-36
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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I've just started reading Dan Brown's latest novel, "The Lost Symbol". If it is anything like his other books - "Angels and Demons" and "The DaVinci Code" - Brown's latest book will be all about hidden signs and symbols, secret knowledge and special meaning of things that are in plain view.

Brown is a master at playing to our curiosity concerning looking for signs. We do it all the time. We get a message from a friend and it doesn't seem quite right and we launch into all kinds of speculation and detective work, trying to uncover the real meaning in the message.

Listening to the news, one wonders what the signs will have to be that will point clearly to the end of our military involvement in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

There are all kinds of people offering their interpretation of the signs in our economic slump. Others are trying to assess the real meaning behind international trade agreements and global economies. Fears of Global Warming are fueled by the analysis of climate change and environmental signs. Some want to offer words of caution; others words of assurance. Some just want to make a quick buck off of the fears or failings of others.

Trying to read the signs and understand them is tricky, especially when the signs we are looking for are those that point to cosmic events such as the return of Christ.

Today's text from Luke's gospel contains Jesus' own words of caution lest we be led astray by false prophets and by focusing on reading too much into the events of the world around us or of our own experience.

But we are nothing if not curious and willing to believe many things and also to think that we are so special in God's eyes, that surely God has something truly historic and wonderful planned "just for us".

This is not an attitude that is unique to us. People of many different eras thought that Christ's return was imminent and that the proof was abundantly clear.

Here is what one famous theologian had to say about the signs of Christ's coming:

"I do not wish to force any one to believe as I do; neither will I permit anyone to deny me the right to believe that the last day is near at hand. These words and signs of Christ compel me to believe that such is the case. For the history of the centuries that have passed since the birth of Christ nowhere reveals conditions like those of the present. There has never been such building and planting in the world. There has never been such gluttonous and varied eating and drinking as now. Wearing apparel has reached its limit in costliness. Who has ever heard of such commerce as now encircles the earth? There have arisen all kinds of art and sculpture, embroidery and engraving, the like of which has not been seen during the whole Christian era.

"In addition men are so delving into the mysteries of things that today a boy of twenty knows more than twenty doctors formerly knew. There is such a knowledge of languages and all manner of

wisdom that it must be confessed, the world has reached such great heights in the things that pertain to the body, or as Christ calls them, "cares of life", eating, drinking, building, planting, buying, selling, marrying and giving in marriage, that every one must see and say either ruin or a change must come. It is hard to see how a change can come. Day after day dawns and the same conditions remain. There was never such keenness, understanding and judgment among Christians in bodily and temporal things as now - ...This compels me to believe that Christ will soon come to judgment...it must soon break in upon them." (Martin Luther, preaching on this text in the 16th century)

Are the signs abundantly clear? Even if they are, what does Jesus instruct his followers to do? We are not to cover in fear or try to grab for everything we can get our hands on. Even in tough times we are to have hope, because we know that our redemption is at hand, near at hand, in Christ.

The Gospel of Jesus offers, not a way of predicting the future, but a way of finding our way through adversity and hard times. Our calling is to greater obedience and deeper trust, to hold our heads high so that we can see the redemption that is, even now, drawing near.

Our Advent attitude is filled with hope because we know that we can trust God with our lives. As believers in Jesus Christ, we can count on his promises and we know that we need not be afraid of the future, because everything is in God's care and keeping.

And so the mission of the church of Jesus Christ here in this place and wherever it may be, continues as we seek to make a strong and joyful witness to God's love and justice and mercy toward all people everywhere.

It may seem that the time of waiting is interminable, but we know that, just like our time of waiting for Christmas, what we do in these "in-between" times is crucial and purposeful and full of preparation for the great good news of God's amazing grace given to us and to all in Jesus Christ.

So, let us continue to make our Advent preparations, sounding a loud note of hope in the midst of despair, confident of God's goodness and love, anticipating a celebration of Jesus' first arrival as the babe of Bethlehem, even as we await the promise of his return, with heads held high and with high spirits too, for Jesus' sake.

Let us pray.