

Sermon: Seeing the Signs

Year C, First Sunday of Advent

[Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36](#)

Offered December 2, 2018 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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Oh there are all these signs of Christmas on the way. The fancy cookie chips in the grocery stores. Someone at the gym has found the Christmas channel on satellite radio. There are so many charities I can donate to. Also lots of companies selling fruitcakes. A million people I am related to need to be ferried from Logan Airport to mid-coast Maine and I have to keep saying, “yes, but I lead worship on the 23rd and 24th. It’s not unreasonable to ask a minister to do that.” So many signs that Christmas is on the way.

It’s kind of nice to hear today’s reading from Jeremiah. Because we can read that passage as a sign that Christmas was coming written some five centuries before the baby arrived in Bethlehem. And what a nice sign it is. *In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.* (Jeremiah 33:15-16) Justice and living in right relationship with God and with each other. Salvation and safety. That sounds awfully good. Especially given the news this week.

Unfortunately, the promises Jeremiah reminded the Israelites of sounded good to them 500 years ago. They sounded good to the people who lived in Palestine during Jesus’ ministry. And during the time of Martin Luther. And Martin Luther King, Jr. So, to be honest, it isn’t just the news this week. We have been longing for justice and right relationship, salvation and safety for quite a while.

Jesus knows that because we all know that. So he reminds us of God’s prophecy, that history is leading somewhere, is leading us to redemption (Luke 21:28). And he tells us what the signs will be when the Son of Man, Jesus, is coming with power and great glory (Luke 21:27). *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.* (Luke 21:25-26)

And that’s nice to know, what to look for. Unfortunately, we’ve been seeing that since roughly the instant second moment Jesus said it until today, with basically no interruptions in between. So we’ve grown a little numb to it. Plus, if we’re honest, we all live in a little fantasy that we have control over our lives, so the signs we’re seeing mean what we think they mean. Red & green M&Ms in CVS on the day after Halloween means that my family will eat turkey together on December 25th. It’s only logical.

Jesus knew that too, because we all know that, that we like to pretend that we are not going to get caught in the roaring of the sea and the crashing of Alzheimers and cancer and heroin. We like to pretend, so we’re all the more shaken when the day comes when we are caught unexpectedly like a trap (Luke 21:34-35).

In that moment, when our heads are down (Luke 21:28) and we are engulfed by the worries of this world (Luke 21:34), that’s when Jesus offers us a sign that only he can offer. *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.* (Luke 21:33) History is leading somewhere. History is leading to the point where all the fruitcakes and red and green M&Ms

and horrible news stories and Alzheimers and cancer and heroin will all pass away. But loving God and loving neighbor will not pass away.

Jesus wants us to be aware that we live in this in between space. We live in this world which believes it will never end, that it will never change. We live in this world which believes that redemption will never draw near, that justice and righteousness, safety and salvation are not coming. We live in that world, but as Christians we are called to live lives of faithful active waiting in the in between time because we hear the promises, see the signs, of the One who holds us in the ending time.¹

There was a sign earlier this week that some of you witnessed. Erin's grandmother passed away, and Erin had made some cookies for the Faire. Erin needed some way of getting the cookies to the Faire without bringing them herself. We all live in the real world. She could have not made the cookies. She could have made the cookies and taken them to the wake. She could have made the cookies and then sat down on the kitchen floor and eaten them with a pint of Ben & Jerry's. All very real world scenarios. But she loved her neighbor. She wanted the cookies to get to the Faire. She sent an email asking for help. And two of her neighbors, Jill and Lindsey, put up their hands and said they'd help, they'd get the cookies to the Faire. I'm not saying that Erin or Jill or Lindsey saw a sign of Christ's coming in the middle of the Great Cookie Caper. But I saw it. And I want to lift it up.

Sometimes I think people outside of churches think that Christians live in a fake, pink cloud, unicorn infested fantasy. They think either that we don't live in the real world, or that their real world has no way of connecting with whatever make believe story the church people live with. They look at Erin's story and they see it taking three people to get a batch of cookies from one side of Brookline to another. They can't see the signs of the Son of Man coming, of Jesus' word enduring when everything else falls away. Of the love of neighbor and the love of God enduring in the next world because we are willing to change our daily lives to include that love in this all too real world.

I know an enormous amount of effort has been put into the Faire and it shows. There are so many lovely things to bid on, so bid early and often. The financial goal for the Faire this year is an aggressive one. I know for sure that there is nothing more that could have been done to get us there.

But I would ask one final thing as we all swing into action to support the Faire. Amidst all the baskets and cookies, hot chocolate bar, take home meals, singing and readings, the soup and chili, the make and take crafts, in the middle of all of that, help everyone who comes to the Faire see the signs. Help everyone see the love of neighbor and the love of God that made all the cookies and baskets and everything else possible. That made the humor and the patience and the exquisite attention to detail possible. That made it possible to have the floors clean and the oil tank full and the snow cleared and everything else. Help everyone who comes to the Faire see the signs.

A chain of events was set in motion all those years ago in Bethlehem. Yes, it led to the cross. And the resurrection and ascension. But it is still going. The signs of justice and righteousness,

¹ Wesley D. Avram, "First Sunday in Advent, Pastoral Perspective, Luke 21:25-36" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 22.

safety and salvation are all around us, reassuring us that redemption is coming. The signs are there in this unholy mess of a world, the signs are there, that God's word endures. The signs are there in a million different moments that have led to the Christmas Faire being as lovely as it will be. So help everyone, including each other, see the signs.