

Luke 21: 5-19 Reading the Signs

As we have just finished a prolonged period where there was a great deal of noise made about reading the signs today's gospel passage seems especially relevant. For at least the last year numerous questions were posed which were designed to give answers so those polls would predict the outcome of the election: reading the various signs in order to predict a particular future event. Despite many attempts by almost too many groups to count, it seems that reading the signs is still more of an art form than a science. The predictions made from those surveys did not predict the outcome which occurred. No matter how often that proves to be the case, people keep trying to identify things which will tell them what is going to happen. Throughout history, people seem determined to predict the future from signs—from events which have occurred either in the past or ones taking place in our present time. Now there are some signs which are fairly dependable. At this time of the year, as the leaves begin to turn color in that amazing display of beauty, we can be confident that the days are growing shorter, the air is growing cooler and that the season is changing. Even without a calendar we would know what things need to be done to prepare for the next season. We take this change of seasons in stride, knowing that the arrival of fall means winter will soon be here. We are also confident that following that, the flowers will bloom again and those trees will turn green as spring comes. Those signs form a pattern we understand. In general we know what to expect and how to prepare. The seasons cycle ever onward and are for the marking of days and weeks and months and years. Those changes which occur from one epoch to another epoch in history are another matter. We aren't sure of these changes or what signals them. It is when we can't see the pattern that we become anxious, fearful and try to find some signs that will give us the security of knowing the future. That seems to be the setting for the passage we read from Luke's gospel. This passage comes at the conclusion of the questioning of Jesus by the leaders of the Jewish religious establishment. This has happened in the most Jewish place possible, the courtyard of the 2nd Temple. Now that the questioning seems to have come to an end, some of the people around Jesus begin admiring the beauty of the Temple. The Temple was the center of the Jewish world. Their identity was focused there. The 2nd Temple was indeed an amazing architectural achievement. It was huge. The outer courtyard where Jesus has been speaking could hold 400,000 people. And at festival times, like the Passover, would indeed hold crowds nearly that large. It was felt that it was appropriate for the building that honored the God who alone is God was impressive. In response to this admiration for the building, Jesus says, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be broken down." These words would have disturbed those who heard them. Many were not happy with the Temple structure because so much of its appearance had been modified by Herod, a Roman puppet king, who was an Edomite, not a Jew. The beautification done by King Herod was done to bring glory to Herod, not to God. Some would have heard this declaration as a way to remove the Herodians blot from the Temple. But, on the other hand the Temple was the Temple of God and not even Herod's pagan corruption could change that. This idea of the Temple's destruction creates questions from those around Jesus. What will this grand destruction mean? Is it the start of a new epoch of history? Is the age of the Messiah and Israel's vindication upon them? They ask, "Teacher,

when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" The destruction of such an important national symbol as the Temple seems to bode ill for the whole enterprise. The disciples want to have the plan laid out for them—when and what will happen. Jesus' answer at this point is surprising. The wars, the destructions, the persecutions that are coming he tells them are things which will and must happen. Lots of the kinds of spectacular events which have been associated with "the end of the world" will occur. It almost seems like Jesus is alerting us that lots of people will come peddling warnings about the end, like the Hal Lindseys, Harold Copings and Tim LaHayes of the world. But Jesus says the end is not associated with those things. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." It seems these things are really more like the colors of fall. They will happen and will continue to happen. But these signs are not to be read as the time when history will change from one era to another. THAT change is also happening, but not with the spectacular events the people expected. That change is happening differently. Israel, at the time of Jesus and for centuries before, had national stories. Chief among them was the story of the Exodus. This was the story of their origins as a people. It was a family story, dealing with Jacob, their ancient ancestor. It was a patterned story which was understood to repeat itself. The pattern included an oppressive nation with an oppressive king where God intervened and the people were vindicated. Egypt could also be Babylon or Assyria; the oppressive king could be Nebuchadnezzar or Antiochus Epiphanies as well as Pharaoh. At this moment in time Rome and Caesar had taken on the leading roles of the oppressor. The expectation was that God would soon intervene and the victory of the people was near. That was the pattern. With this story also came the ability to see the pattern and predict when it would happen again. The rebuilding of the Temple by Herod after the Maccabees were defeated by Rome was seen as a sign that God was about to dwell with the people again. The presence of John the Baptist, a new prophet like Elijah raised expectations that Messiah and the victorious army of Israel's resistance were about to reappear. The stage was set for God to do it all again. And in a sense, with Jesus, God was doing exactly that. The story was repeating. In another sense, however, the story was being reframed. It would no longer be part of a repeating cycle. This time, God's intervention was different. No longer was the story that of Israel alone. Now the story would include an intervention within Israel, within the people of God that would restore her vocations as originally given to Abraham: "to be a light to the nations." This intervention would be for all peoples. The story would not revolve around the symbols of national pride and idolatry: the land, the temple, the ancestry. Instead, the symbols are transformed as the promise is fulfilled. These things are returned to their rightful place in the national narrative. The people are no longer exclusively blessed, but are blessed to be a blessing to all nations. The temple is replaced as God's dwelling because God no longer dwells within a building, but within humanity in Jesus Christ. The more the story is reframed, the more it echoes with the themes of the prophets, both in warning and in promise. Did you notice within this reframing of the story by Jesus, he never does answer the question, "When will this be?" He talks around it. He talks of signs, but not about the end. He talks of persecutions, even within families, but says these things happen well before the end. He talks of endurance, but never states to what end one is to endure. The images are dramatic. It is easy to get caught up in them and the theme of the end. But Jesus refuses to be pinned down

on this matter. The question becomes, within this reframed story, where is the good news for us. The first answer to that question is found in Jesus himself. Jesus says, "So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." This is Jesus telling us that he is with us and will not abandon us. Indeed his resurrection and ascension are not seen as his absence from the disciples in Acts, but rather they are how the disciples become emboldened by his presence with them. This leads us to a second, and perhaps the most important answer to what God is doing in this reframed story. God is already establishing the new age among us. Here is the paradox. The new age comes not with wars and tumult, although they continue to happen. The new age comes not with violent uprising although they still occur. But rather the new age comes in the quiet of a night with the birth of a child in Bethlehem. The new age comes not by resisting the forces of empire, who control with the threat of death, but rather with a journey through death to new life, which God, in Jesus undertakes. This journey taken by Jesus destroys death and its power. The wars and tumult which happen, even in our day, are the dying cries of the kings of this world. The God who created the universe has subverted their power and sown the seeds of the new kingdom, the new reign of God, within our world, within our finite nature. To be honest, the wars, the violence, the cosmic signs of destruction are indeed terrible. They are frightening. All of humanity suffers, oppressed and oppressors alike. But God too, suffers with us. This tumult which is spoken of in our lesson today assumes terrible power in the face of this honesty that it is repetitive. But it does not have ultimate power. It cannot control Jesus, and it does not control those who are named and claimed by God in baptism. Understanding that fact we have some options. We can take these apocalyptic tests within the gospels as a warning. If we do this, then again, we have options. We can either reorder the way we live or try to figure out the events and the date on the calendar which they supposedly represent. Another option is to take these words as an invitation to live now by faith and hope so that we can appreciate the gift of the present we have been given. When Jesus counsels believers to not only not be alarmed but also not to plan for those days, he is inviting us to a living and active trust so that we may believe that the various trials that come are actually opportunities to witness. If we accept that invitation, Jesus promises to equip us to speak and respond when these occasions arise. It seems that now is a good time for us to take that invitation and live into the faith and hope that we have. Now is a good time for us to witness to the love which Christ has for us and which we are called to have for one another— even those with whom we disagree. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.