

Sermon for November 28, 2021 – First Sunday of Advent
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Sign, sign, Everywhere a sign
Blockin' out the scenery, Breakin' my mind
Do this, don't do that, Can't you read the sign?

Recognize that song? In this Sunday's text, Jesus' words made me think of this chorus. "Sign, sign everywhere a sign." Jesus says "There will be signs..." Signs that the Kingdom of God has come near.

Signs often interpret what is or tell us what is to come. They prepare us to see or be ready for the road ahead - An upcoming curve, railroad tracks, a dead end. On family road trips we have often giggled at the "Bump ahead" signs. Ever notice how often the bumps labeled with signs seem smaller than the bumps that have no signage? Some signs are clearer than others.

Jesus says there will be signs that the Kingdom of God has come near. But just as the "Five Man Electrical Band" lyrics sing "Can't you read the sign?", I find myself wondering will we be able to read the signs? How will we recognize the kingdom of God come near?

Jesus seems to respond to this concern with 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." He continues, so also when you see the signs you will know that that kingdom of God is near." Jesus reassures that just as we have come to know what sprouts on trees signal, we will see and come to know the things that tell us that the kingdom of God has come near. Jesus says we will see signs and be able to interpret them as God come near.

Jesus uses trees in the parable because the hearers are familiar with trees. Trees and the changing of the seasons have been part of the people's life experience. But wonder for a moment – if you had never seen a tree sprout leaves before, if you had never looked at a picture or read about trees and their seasonal changes, if you had never heard anyone tell you the story of bare branches spouting forth flowers as summer approaches, if you had never experienced the transition from spring to summer, then would you know and understand the sprouts when you see them as a sign of the coming season?

How are we to know and understand the signs of the Kingdom of God come near? To recognize the signs God must be part of our lived experiences. We need to read what has been written and passed down, we need to hear others tell us their stories of the Kingdom of God come near. We need to dwell in the reality of God's presence long enough to see the promise repeated around us.

I think we are quick to assume that the signs of God's presence will point to peace-filled, stable conditions. My knee jerk reaction when people ask where I have seen signs of God's presence is to capture lovely scenes of beauty in nature, family harmony, undisturbed congregational life, non-pandemic conditions. But when I read the word that has been written and passed down, I find that the signs of the Kingdom of God come near often point to tumbling walls, wilderness journeys, collapsed kingdoms and exile, radical reorganization, suffering and stoning, shipwrecks and prison cells. When entering into thoughtful conversation with others, I frequently hear them tell the stories of the Kingdom of God come near amidst cancer treatments and beside hospice bedsides, at the intersection of job change, financial struggle and reevaluation of life, within the struggle for justice, within the turmoil of the unknown, at the breaking point.

In the Transitional Ministry course I took this month, we discussed the kingdom of God come near in times that lack peace and stability, in times of transition. Transition is the time that follows a change, a time of difficult work of letting go of what was and developing a new identity for what will be. It can feel like a tumultuous time. If asked where we have experienced signs of God come near at Trinity, I am sure many of our knee jerk reactions may be to recall moments of large numbers, exciting programs, peace-filled, stable conditions. But I wonder as we consider the words that have been passed down, the stories that have been shared – is this time of transition, changed by the pandemic and staffing changes, is this exactly where we are invited to see signs that point to God's presence - God come near, drawing us forward, shaping us for the work of the Kingdom? Can't you see the signs?

Jesus says "There will be signs... on earth distress among nations, roaring of sea and waves, people will faint, there will be fear, shaking..." For when the Kingdom of God comes near things will be shaken, challenged and changed...we are shaken, challenged and changed. Signs will not always point to the peace-filled and stable conditions. Instead we should not be surprised by signs pointing to God's presence in the unexpected, for the ultimate sign literally arrived in a stable.

As we enter this four weeks of Advent, we wait to once again tell the story of the greatest sign of the Kingdom of God come near – Jesus. The Kingdom of God came near in the flesh that dwelt among us, and through him we are promised eternal life in the presence of God. This eternal life in God's presence has already begun. You live life in the promised presence of God come near today, even as we await the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God to come. Expect that there will be signs that confirm this truth. Read the word that has been passed on to you. Hear one another's stories of lived experiences. Dwell in the reality of God's presence long enough to see the promise repeated around you. Just as the tree spouts leaves and you have come to know that summer is already near, may you also see signs and know that the kingdom of God is near.