

“Signs”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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1st Sunday in Advent ©

Jer. 33:14-26

Luke 21:25-36

[Jesus said,]

“ When all of this starts happening, stand up straight and be brave.

You will soon be set free.”

Luke 21:28 [CEV]

Let us pray... O God,

Let this be a season of renewed hope for us as individuals, for us as a church,

for us as a nation, for us a world, fulfilling your promise of peace & goodwill

Amen

There was a lunar eclipse this week –

though it wasn't visible in our part of the world.

Phenomena in the sky have always been viewed by human beings

as having some meaning as a sign of things to come like the weather

or symbolic of otherwise unrelated events.

In Viking and Chinese cultures, it was thought that the moon was

literally being eaten by a monster and so the people would gather outside

to clang pots together & shout at the sky to scare the monster away.

The lunar eclipse would last just under an hour,

so their efforts met with a favorable result.

There is a difference between signs and symbols,

omens and metaphors.

An example of a sign would be deer tracks in the snow.

Such tracks were left by a real animal –

they are evidence of the thing itself and not just representing it.

An example of a symbol would be a deer crossing sign

with the picture of a deer on it.

Now, signs and symbols can be confused, for example...

like when a person called in to a radio talk show to complain about

how deer crossing signs seem to be at the busiest areas

on highways and roads.

This person wanted to know why they couldn't be placed

at less traveled thoroughfares.

The talk show host patiently explained,

“Well... they are ... there... to alert the drivers.”

But this person didn't quite get the idea that

deer really can't read and don't know any better, anyway.

Willard, p.2

People can be susceptible to misinterpret phenomena –

Is it a sign to be taken literally

or a symbol that represents something else?

Consider this historical anecdote about Christopher Columbus.

when he was stranded in Jamaica on his fourth voyage to the New World.

His crew had been a difficult group to manage at sea and

their behavior was no better among the native people who aided them.

When the crew had worn out their welcome,

the Indians withheld giving them any more food.

Christopher Columbus consulted an almanac and came up with an idea.

He told the native chief that the European god was upset with them

for withholding food and would take away the moon.

It so happened that a lunar eclipse was to take place that very hour

as Columbus predicted.

http://starryskies.com/The_sky/events/lunar-2003/columbus.eclipse.html

As this occurred, much fear and trepidation arose among the native people

and they begged Columbus to do something.

He said he'd go and consult with his god and so, off he went by himself –

but to check on how much sand was left in his hour glass

anticipating that the eclipse would last no more than an hour.

He returned to announce that his god had changed his mind –

just as the moon returned to view.

The native people thought the moon was literally being taken away,

such that, to them it was a sign as well as a symbol of divine displeasure.

But their misperception allowed Columbus' trick to work –

and this whole episode serves as a sign and symbol for

what was yet to come in the conquest of the New World.

In sharp contrast to this event is the story of the Pilgrims and the Indians,

whose relationship – flawed as it may have been,

still provides an example for a New World that could've been

and a Beloved Community that can yet be a social reality.

Signs and symbols have been part of Christianity from the beginning –

like the star in the east at Christmas time that served as a sign to guide

Persian astrologers to the Holy Land for the Nativity.

It is conjectured by modern astronomers that the Eastern Star was a conjunction

of Jupiter and Venus before the constellation, Leo –

symbolizing a great king coming to Israel as the Lion of Judah.

http://science.nasa.gov/science-news/science-at-nasa/2000/ast16may_1/

Willard, p.3

When it comes to predicting the future by watching the skies,
meteorologists did a great job in anticipating the path of Hurricane Sandy.

This past weekend, I went to NJ for my 40th Reunion and
had the opportunity to visit my home town in Plainfield.

Though I saw many trees felled by the winds, there was relatively
little destruction to homes and buildings.

Plainfield is inland and was not as directly affected as coastal towns,
but what was evident was the deterioration and disrepair of many
of the fine Victorian-style homes there,
suggesting a long-term catastrophe of economic recession.

This would seem to be a sign for the direction things seem to be heading
and a symbol for the future.

Are we waiting for a sign that God will clean up the mess
or is God waiting for us to get our act together by working together.
Maybe it's both.

This is on the minds of so many people in our country,
regardless of their affiliation.

There's good reason to be concerned about our fiscal solvency
and to seek responsible ways to overturn this human-caused disaster.

There was a glimmer of hope on the horizon this past week –
an unexpected sign of hope that is perhaps a symbol for renewal as well.
California is reporting some hopeful trends in the areas of
decreased unemployment and increased real estate sales
and a projected reduction in the state's deficit – even a budget surplus.

In California, there had been severe austerity measures taken,
including deep budget cuts in state government,
and most recently, a temporary tax increase.

Local communities are rallying,
though the inland urban sprawl of LA continues to struggle.

Nevertheless, California –
which had been teetering on the brink of economic collapse,
is showing signs of recovery which may prove to be
symbolic for what other communities must do
as well as a sign of national economic recovery.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/28/us/california-shows-signs-of-resurgence.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20121128

Willard, p.4

A frequent visual theme on Christmas cards often portrays

a star shining in the east shaped like a great cross in the sky.

A cross-shaped star symbolizes that guiding sign for those magi of antiquity,
but also as a symbol for Jesus of Nazareth who would grow up
to be crucified on a cross.

The Star of Bethlehem is both sign and symbol of the nature and mission
of the baby who would grow up to become an adult
and save us all from every dis-ease.

The cross itself is a powerful symbol,
evoking empathy for the suffering of Christ crucified,
evoking hope despite death through the vision of an empty cross,
and affirming God's acceptance of us
as a human figure, shaped like a cross in a wide, open-armed embrace.

As a congregation, we have talked a lot about our mortgage,
which is looming ahead like a cloud.

But I am told there's a hopeful sign on our horizon, some good news...
which you will just have to wait for until next Sunday.

Though it can look darkest before the dawn,
we can take a lesson from those ancient people
who got out there banging their pots & pans together,
clanging cymbals – that's c-y-m-b-a-l-s, beating drums
and raising their voices to speak up against
that monster devouring the moon
and driving away the evil spirit of ignorance and fear,
anticipating the dawn of a new day and a hopeful future.

As we celebrate the lighting of the first Advent candle – which symbolizes hope,
let's recall the words of that singer-prophet, George Harrison, of the Beatles:
*Here comes the sun[do-du-do-do]. Here comes the sun, And I say, "It's all right"
[da-dah-da-di dah-da-di dah-di-da-do-da-di da].*

Little darling, It's been a long, cold lonely winter.

Little darling, It feels like years since it's been here

Here comes the sun. Here comes the sun, And I say, "It's all right".

...The smiles returning to the faces.

...It seems like years since it's been here

...I feel that ice is slowly melting.

...It seems like years since it's been clear

Here comes the sun. Here comes the sun, And I say, "It's all right" ...

<http://www.metrolyrics.com/here-comes-the-sun-lyrics-beatles.html>

Amen

*Our lesson from Jeremiah 33:14-26 is an affirmation
of God's continuing relationship with the Jewish people
and the promise of a great ruler to come – the heir of King David.*

14 The Lord said:

I made a wonderful promise to Israel and Judah,
and the days are coming when I will keep it.

15 I promise that the time will come
when I will appoint a king from the family of David,
a king who will be honest and rule with justice.

16 In those days, Judah will be safe;
Jerusalem will have peace and will be named,
“The Lord Gives Justice.”

17 The king of Israel will be one of David's descendants,
18 and there will always be priests from the Levi tribe
serving at my altar and offering sacrifices
to please me and to give thanks.

19 Then the Lord told me:

20 I, the Lord, have an agreement with day and night,
so they always come at the right time.

You can't break the agreement I made with them,
21 and you can't break the agreements I have made with David's family
and with the priests from the Levi tribe who serve at my altar.

A descendant of David will always rule as king of Israel,
22 and there will be more descendants of David
and of the priests from the Levi tribe
than stars in the sky or grains of sand on the beach.

23 The Lord also said:

24 You've heard foreigners insult my people by saying,
“The Lord chose Israel and Judah, but now he has rejected them,
and they are no longer a nation.”

25 Jeremiah, I will never break my agreement with the day and the night
or let the sky and the earth stop obeying my commands.

26 In the same way, I will never reject the descendants
of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
or break my promise that they will always have
a descendant of David as their king.

I will be kind to my people Israel, and they will be successful again.

Luke21:25-36 (CEV)

[Jesus said,]

‘Strange things will happen to the sun, moon, and stars.

The nations on earth will be afraid of the roaring sea and tides,
and they won’t know what to do.

People will be so frightened that they will faint
because of what is happening to the world.

Every power in the sky will be shaken.

Then the Son of Man will be seen,
coming in a cloud with great power and glory.

When all of this starts happening, stand up straight and be brave.

You will soon be set free.

Then Jesus told them a story:

‘When you see a fig tree or any other tree putting out leaves,
you know that summer will soon come.

So, when you see these things happening,
you know that God’s kingdom will soon be here.

You can be sure that some of the people of this generation
will still be alive when all of this takes place.

The sky and the earth won’t last forever,
but my words will.

Don’t spend all of your time thinking about
eating or drinking or worrying about life.

If you do, the final day will suddenly catch you like a trap.

That day will surprise everyone on earth.

Watch out and keep praying that you can escape all that is going to happen
and that the Son of Man will be pleased with you.