

Advent I

Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

St. Mary the Virgin

December 2, 2018

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“Jesus said, ‘There will be signs....’” Amen.

Today, we needn't look far to see signs of distress all around us—the degradation of our environment; political self-interests tearing apart the common good that is so essential to our society and nation; a dramatic rise in hate crimes; innocent lives destroyed and families damaged by gun violence; families ripped apart by migration policy; incarcerating innocent children; losing one's home and way of life through natural disasters--fire, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or flood--and forced to start over again. Each of us probably can add several more items to this list.

Does this mean that the end of the world is near and the day of judgment is at-hand? It's possible. Today, we have the capacity to destroy our environment and to annihilate human society through warfare far more quickly than early Christian communities could ever imagine. We also have the capacity to change course and help usher in the just and compassionate reign of God--if we have the will to do so. This, I believe, is what today's readings are pointing us toward.

The Hebrew scriptures are rife with Messianic and apocalyptic predictions. The Apostles and earliest Christian communities believed that Jesus would certainly return in their lifetime. By the time of the Gospel of Luke was written, the message of apocalyptic urgency has been tempered with another message, one offering hope and also how to remain faithful despite the signs of calamity and chaos that might surround us.¹ Viewed another way, such signs are also can be signs of “God's new beginnings”² in us, and in the world.

Biblically, a sign is an event or act that signals God's intention or presence. This morning (at the 9 am service) we hear about an apparition to a poor indigenous man, Juan Diego, of a woman who called herself the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the signs that she performed. Only ten years earlier, the Spanish had conquered the Aztec people, destroying a temple to their mother goddess and then building a chapel to the Virgin Mary on that site. The indigenous people undoubtedly were distressed. The apparition and signs performed near the town Villa de Guadalupe would help the people absorb the loss of a powerful figure in their indigenous

¹ S. MacLean Gilmour, “Introduction and Exegesis,” “The Gospel According to St. Luke,” p. 369, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952. Mark Davis, “Left Behind and Loving It,” November 25, 2018. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/11/the-imperative-of-expectation>

² Paul Scherer, “Exposition.” “The Gospel According to St. Luke,” p.369, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952.

religion, replacing it with a distinctly Christian presence who appeared to one of their own culture. In this way, they were able to embrace the Virgin--and Christianity—as speaking to them, in their midst.

Some years ago, while I was spending time with an indigenous group in Mexico, a woman asked me in Spanish about my occupation. When I said that I was an Episcopal priest, her face brightened as she said, “We have Our Lady of Guadalupe; and the Virgin Mary; and also, the male priests.” For her, Guadalupe was understood as a distinct persona who intimately understood the particular need, pain, and challenges of her people. Although some have been uneasy with the overlap of Christianity and pre-Christian elements, another way of looking at it is a sign of God’s reconciling action in the world, offering hope and a path to abiding faith across and through cultural differences. This has occurred many times throughout Jewish and Christian history.

But how do we know it is a sign related to God or not? Some may remember the Hale-Bopp comet discovered in 1995 and visible to the naked eye for a couple of years. The leaders of the Heaven’s Gate religious movement interpreted the comet as a sign that members of their group were to shed their human bodies and to enter another evolutionary level of being, which resulted in the mass suicide of 39 members.³ How do we know what signs to trust, and how we are to respond?

Three steps that I’ve found to help guide my reflection and response are: discernment, active waiting, and then action. Discernment is a biblical practice of wisdom, seeking to identify the guiding presence or absence of God’s Holy Spirit. It depends on our deepening understanding of God, and also of ourselves.⁴ Above all, discernment is about humility. Our Psalm (25:1-9) this morning is effectively a prayer of discernment. *Show me your ways, O God, and teach me your paths. Lead me into your truth and teach me; all the paths of God are love and faithfulness.* This last phrase is perhaps one of the most powerful tests of God’s presence and God’s reign.

Second, active waiting is what our season of Advent is about. Taking time to test our discernment keeps us from acting on impulse, rather than what God might have us do. Active waiting is akin to the Gospel’s parable of the fig tree. Shoots and leaves may emerge as signs, but will they bear good fruit? Just as plants deepen their roots under the soil, during this waiting time we are to actively prepare ourselves for that time when we need to respond or act.

Three, action. Sometimes acting quickly is urgent. Yet the more we come to know and understand God through our faith, the easier and surer our actions will be. Even if there is only

³ Brenda Brasher, “The Civic Challenge of Virtual Eschatology: Heaven’s Gate and Millennial Fever in Cyberspace.” In *Religion and Social Policy*, edited by Paula D. Nesbitt. Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2001, p. 200.

⁴ Ernest E. Larkin, “Discernment of Spirits,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Gordon S. Wakefield, ed., pp. 115-16. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983.

a moment for of a deep, prayerful breath, it can help us consider whether God is guiding us or not. Any action should lead to further discernment of God's presence and guidance.

We also have just marked the fortieth anniversary of the tragedy in Jonestown. The People's Temple in its early years in Indianapolis was a progressive religious movement, preaching racial integration and inclusivity in a mid-1950s city and nation that was deeply segregated. In those years, many understood it as a sign of ushering in God's reign. But how could a sign turn out so wrong? The leader, Jim Jones, made some choices along the way that were of self-interest, abuse of power, and arrogance, which radically changed the movement. This is why a process of continual discernment is so necessary, in order to perceive whether something is still of God's spirit or has turned away from it.

Yesterday, many of you were at Grace Cathedral for the ordination of Kathleen Bean and Nan Slavin to the diaconate. For both, the journey has been long, involving intense periods of discernment and testing whether or not their call was authentically from God--including seemingly endless requests to tell one's faith story over and over, the lengthy list of requirements to fulfill, the perpetual period of waiting, not only for God's time, but for the Church's time of committee schedules and then an ordination date. Then, the day of action: when they take the step to make their ordination vows. Some like Kathleen and Nan have endured with active patience, growing and deepening along the way.

Others have lived out their call to ministry in ways other than ordination. During my time at St. Mary's, I had never seen so many people in a congregation actively serving as Christ's hands and feet in this community and in the world. This is in itself a sign of the nearness of God's reign.

This morning, I also want to acknowledge the way in which former President and lifelong Episcopalian George Herbert Walker Bush lived out his faith by reaching across differences of view. Having lost re-election, he would later build a friendship with his opponent, former President Clinton, and occasionally work together on common humanitarian concerns. He also was friends with others who differed with him politically, including former President Barack Obama.

Over the last few weeks I've been especially moved in my own discernment by the tragic devastation of the Camp Fire in Paradise and the fires in Malibu, perhaps because they follow so closely to last year's fires in Santa Rosa, Sonoma and other parts of the North Bay. The magnitude of loss is heartbreaking. Surprisingly, in both towns, the Episcopal churches did not burn, although this is not to be taken as a sign of divine favoritism. The rectors, staff, and many parishioners lost their homes and possessions in the fires. But the tragedies also have triggered an outpouring of compassion and care from across the Church.⁵ St. Mary's Thanksgiving

⁵ Pat McCaughan, "California Episcopalians Connect, Deepen Community Amid Devasting (sic) Wildfires." *The Episcopal Church*. November 15, 2018. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/california-episcopalians-connect-deepen-community-amid-devasting-wildfires>

offering, and notes written to first responders, have been part of this outpouring. Evacuees have spoken of gathering strength and the resilience to move forward from this outpouring.

In a town where many had fled from the Malibu fires, about an hour away, a local Muslim group with whom the Episcopal parish there had developed a friendship, prepared a meal for those fleeing the fires who had gathered at the parish.⁶ The Episcopal rector from Malibu, who had lost her own home, spoke of the increased sense of community that people were feeling: “I think the message here is that material things really are not what’s important. What’s important is community and caring about each other; being in relationship with each other. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”⁷

The leader of Paradise Adventist Church wrote, following the loss of their own church building, “Though the physical attributes of our earthly Paradise are destroyed, the spirit of Paradise has spread across the country and around the world, as people are moved to volunteer resources to help.”⁸ An interviewer with *Christianity Today* asked another church pastor from Paradise what message would he want his congregation to hear, which was now scattered far and wide. He replied, “I would tell them to grieve well.” “God’s been faithful with helping me take it one step at a time.” He reported a comment from FEMA officials who had been shocked at the devastation. “They said that for the best chance of reviving this city, the faith community needs to be engaged moving forward because the faith community is where people find belonging, they find acceptance, they find hope.”⁹

Tragic losses can bring people together, across boundaries of city and faith tradition. This is the Kingdom of God: when we reach across the boundaries that separate us from one another, our humanity is enriched, just as we may enrich and inspire others. We can’t transform the world singlehandedly. But we can work together across our differences on those things that matter most. What will you do this Advent to help prepare the way for the reign of Christ?

⁶ “Inches from California Wildfire, Episcopal church in Malibu Faces Uncertainty.” Posted Nov. 20, 2018. Episcopal News Service. <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2018/11/20/inches-from-california-wildfire-episcopal-church-in-malibu-faces-uncertainty/>

⁷ McCaughan, op cit.

⁸ Kate Shellnutt, “Paradise Fire Burned Most Church Buildings, But ‘the Church Is Still Alive,’” November 16, 2018. *Christianity Today*. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/november/paradise-california-churches-camp-fire-revival.html>

⁹ Shellnutt, op cit.