

Look for the Signposts
Pastor Morgan Murray
West Valley Presbyterian Church

Lk 21:29–34 NRSV

29 Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Title: Look for the Signposts

Have you ever wished that you could predict the future?

If we stop to think about it, we'd say “YES!” And then, “Wait a minute... maybe not.” Because while we may want to know the future, we only want to know it IF we could do something about it. In Greek mythology, Cassandra was cursed with the ability to know the future but never have anyone believe her. Nobody wants that.

This passage of scripture may not seem very Christmas-y, but it is one of the readings for Advent in the lectionary. That is because Advent is about preparing for Christ's coming again even as we celebrate Christ coming in Bethlehem two millenia ago. This parable is one of the apocalyptic texts in Luke's gospel. *Apocalyptic* doesn't mean *doomsday*. It means revealing. Jesus says to his hearers: If you are trying to anticipate the in-breaking of God's kingdom, then look for the signs. As surely as a fig tree with new leaves tells you summer is coming, there are plenty of indicators that confirm God is on the move—if you know what to look for. There is a trick to predicting the future. Do you know what it is?

If you want to know what's about to happen, remember: *It's already happening.*

What I mean is: Whatever the next big thing is, right now it's a small thing that is growing. Whatever earth-shattering shifts are about to take place, we can see the fault lines starting to form.

We are actually really good at paying attention to certain indicators:

- Meteorological data – sunshine or rain?
- Economic indicators – growth or recession?
- Sports drafts – is my team preparing for a winning season or this another rebuild year?
- Polls – which party will have more power after the next election?

But the truth is, most of the time we only recognize the signs in hindsight. This is one reason

why Luke includes this parable in his gospel. He is writing in the year 85 CE, plus or minus five-to-ten years. Rome marched on Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple in 70 CE. So Luke and his readers could still be reeling from events that happened five years ago. Or perhaps he is reflecting on a historical event that happened before his younger readers were born. He could have been reflecting on Jesus' words the same way we reflect on events leading up to 9/11.

And he is probably including this for the same reason that journalists in 2021 keep referring back to Bill Gates' 2015 TED Talk titled "The next outbreak? We're not ready." He wants to say: None of this caught Jesus by surprise. Which means none of this caught God by surprise. And none of this is outside God's purposes.

So when Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place," the clearest meaning is that he predicting the fall of Jerusalem within the lifetime of his contemporaries. We could then say that this text really doesn't have any relevance for us. But what I notice is that Luke begins by saying, "Then Jesus told them a *parable*." Parables are a very special kind of story. Like a precious gem, a parable can reveal more of itself as it is held under the light and slowly turned to examine each facet. Like a blooming flower, a parable takes on new beauty and new meaning as it opens up. Like a family heirloom, a parable's value and significance grows with time and means more to us as we grow older and wiser about the true nature of things. When Luke says Jesus is offering a parable, he is telling us that we need to pay attention – no matter who we are or what millennium we live in.

Advent is about waking up and being alert. We are to look for indications of God's influence and join in! Do we pay attention to the signs that the kingdom of God is near? *Where do we see God's growing influence...*

... in the world...

... in our church ...

... in your own life?

It is way too easy to say, "I can't see it anywhere! Everything is a mess!" If God's kingdom is about things getting better, then I can't see God's kingdom anywhere because everything is getting worse!

But remember: The "these things" Jesus is talking about here were every bit as scary and heartbreaking and up-ending to his first audience as the things we face now. *It is in the breakdown that God breaks through.*

Last week I got to hear an interview with Jane Goodall. She began her life's work by trying to save chimpanzees from humans. Now she works to get humans to be protected from themselves. Goodall readily admits that, over the course of her life, things have gotten worse for the natural world. And yet she still has profound hope. For her, hope requires action and engagement. She describes like being in a long, dark tunnel with a light at the end, like a star. We don't hope that – if we stand still – the star will come to us. No, hope means we keep our eye on that light and move toward it... climbing over what we need to climb and removing the barriers along way. For her, hope is not found in the popular saying think globally and act locally. "Quite honestly," she said, "if you think globally you will quite depressed." Instead she

urges people – especially young people – to notice problems right around them that they would like to solve and then work with a few friends to solve them. "We have not just compromised the future of young people, we've been stealing it. ... But is there nothing they can do? Was that true? No, there's always something to do." Goodall's hope is fed by the energy, imagination, and love of young people for their world.

What things will take place before the generation born today passes away?

- Will they, as one study suggests, experience extreme climate events at a rate that up to seven times higher than people born in 1960?
- Will they see an end to this pandemic, or will they be living in the Age of Global Disease?
- Will they see the end of democracy in United States? Will they see the end of the United State altogether?
- When it comes to the church, will they see evangelical Christianity tear itself apart? Will the forms and structures of mainline Christianity we have known and loved our whole lives be a dim memory for them?

Can we be open to the possibility that this would be a good thing, a necessary thing, for God's kingdom to come near?

And if all these things we to come to pass, would that be a cause for despair or a signpost that old things must pass away because God is doing something new? Can we remember that nothing is happening beyond the sphere of God's control, AND YET we who pray Thy Kingdom Come must also work – *really work* – to bring that kingdom about?

Jesus said. Look around. Notice what's happening. Look at the fig tree. A new season, a new age is beginning. Take heart. What's coming not is not outside of God's loving, sovereign will. God is in control. My promises are forever. So Have hope. Keep moving forward.

Get ready: [New life is coming.](#)

Amen.