

May the Words of My Mouth and the Meditations of our Hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, Oh Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Jesus said, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from the fear and the foreboding of what is coming upon the world.”

For all of history, people have looked to signs from the natural world to help them make decisions. Comets warned of great change or ominous calamity. Lunar eclipses caused fear and trembling. Earthquakes and volcanos demonstrated the wrath of the mountain gods. The entrails of a wild goat indicated plenty or famine. People connect these natural events to themselves, and to their leaders. To appease the mountain gods, they sacrificed animals and, if it was really bad, humans. Famines and floods were attributed to bad decisions made by dynasties, and resulted in righteous calls for revolution. People have always believed that the earth and humanity existed in a relationship, and that they could learn by, as Jesus says, “being alert” to the signs around them.

Now, we 20th and 21st century types think of most signs as superstitions.

Black cats crossing our paths, birds pooping on our shoulders, and rain on our wedding days all strike us as silly, antiquated methods of deciding what to do or predicting our fate. Would any of us consider visiting a famous oracle working in a cave filled with noxious smoke who spews nonsense deciphered by their minions a reliable signal to help us decide whether we should go to war or get married or move to a new house? We’d think that was crazy.

And yet, I have faith in signs. Even the oracle. If there’s a famous oracle, many people consult them – they are the best, after all. If you were trying to decide whether to go to war against someone, you might consult the oracle. “Well, wise person,” you might begin, “I really need to put an end to the raiding on my lands. I have 2,000 strong trained warriors, and 200 excellent cavalry, but I just don’t know. Should I go to battle?” To me, it seems logical that the previous week, the raiders’ leader also paid the cave a visit, and reported that he feared he would be attacked, had 1500 warriors and no cavalry, but a great plan to lure his opponent into a valley where they wouldn’t be able to form up in time to fight as they had been trained. Armed with all this info, the oracle offers some cryptic remarks about signs of darkness in a valley and the screams of an animal in a trap, and is proven infallibly wise when the battle starts. Of course, all depends on what the leaders decide to do with the signs. The coming action, for the most part, depends upon their decision-making.

The “signs” are not invented; they reflect actual conditions on the ground.

I really believe that. So, I am relatively comfortable watching for and listening to the signs around me.

The real question is - will I pay attention to them? Will I be alert, as Jesus challenges me to be?

We are beset on all sides by signs. My drive to work is so routine that I don’t need to pay much attention to the street signs I pass, and I stop at the red lights and stop signs automatically. But think of how jolting a “Detour” sign is, one that might take me a couple hundred yards off my intended path and two extra minutes. Enough to get one’s dander up, right? Aren’t we all troubled by unusual signs? When all signs are pointed our way, we barely think we even need to read them. But get me in an unfamiliar spot where the signs go by too fast, and I can miss all the signs that are right there to point me in the right direction. I might get it right the third time around the roundabout.

To make them even more confusing, some signs are deliberately posted to distract us from our path. I hate to admit how many times I've gone in to check my email and found myself an hour later reading the latest article about Harry and Meghan's feud with Will and Kate. Or reading the reviews of a new tech gadget that will solve all of my ugly tangled wire problems.

So, to sum up: 1, We often discount important signs if we stop looking for them; 2, We can miss them when we rush too fast through "the worries of this life," as Jesus calls them; 3, They can make us uncomfortable when they detour us; And 4. Some signs are actually meant to help us lose our way.

How can we be sure which signs to follow?

The signs that Jesus offers in today's gospel are signs of danger and destruction, and one doesn't have to let their mind wander far to link the "roaring of the seas and the waves" to the current climate change we're trying to understand and hopefully to remediate. But Jesus often turns a lesson on its head. He tells us how to consider the signs we encounter. He tells that when we are faced with dark frightening signs, that's precisely when we need to be looking around for signs of love, signs of positive change, signs to put aside the worry and rush and distraction of this earthly life and instead, to be alert to the signs that help us lift our eyes up to look toward the stars. Or, at the very least, high enough to see the faces of those around us.

So not only do we need to recognize positive signs, we need to seek those signs actively.

Now is the season of the year when darkness grows day by day. Signs of cold winter blow in through every crack. It's no wonder that in 380 church leaders chose December 25, the time of the winter solstice, to celebrate Jesus' birth – the return of the Light. Even spring, also once regarded as the time of Jesus' birth by some church elders, and a time when we look for renewal, is also called "the hungry season." Our winter stores of grain and root vegetables are running out, the game is skinny, and the few green shoots don't provide many calories. It can be a very troubled and cranky time of year. Looking for the positive isn't always easy, but both Jesus and St. Paul give us sound advice. Jesus reminds us that green leaves are signs of warm days to come. St. Paul joy in his Christian family reminds us to celebrate the warmth in our own community, and the joy of seeing each other face to face.

We must consciously look for those signs of summer. All of us are longing to return to the warmth and love of community, where we can nourish our common need to look toward the stars and toward our increased and abounding love for each other. We all search for a time to forget the cold troubles of the day, the works of darkness, and instead to put on the warmth of God's light and with confidence in that warmth, to look about for important signs we may be missing. Are our neighbors OK? Are our colleagues OK? Would a little light and community warmth help them to weather their own storms?

What signs are we recognizing in ourselves, signs that we have the strength to look up and out - to wonder, to create and to find new direction and hope? What will we do with the signs all around us?

**In this darkest of seasons,
may the increasing light of our Advent candles
fill us with the light and warmth we need
to recognize signs of God's love and community all around us.
May it give us the hope as a community
to reveal the signs of the coming summer
to all we meet along the way.**

Amen.

**Laura Brewer
St. John's Episcopal Church
Newton, MA
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