

Luke 21:7-28
Can You Read the Signs?
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Have you ever thought about all the signs you encounter every day?

You probably don't think about them that much, but you use them every day.

They tell which streets are one-way,
how fast you are allowed to drive,
where to find a restroom (and which one is for you),
when your favorite store is open,
where to buy a meal,
what dangerous areas to avoid,
where to find a sale,
and a zillion other things that are part of daily life.

Without signs, we'd be confused, unsure where we were, have no idea where to find our daily necessities and, a good bit of the time, probably lost.

But what happens when signs give a mixed message or simply make no sense?

Doug Lansky, put together a book containing photos of signs he and others have taken on travels around America and a number of other countries.

Signspotting, shows signs that are unintentionally comical because they were composed by people for whom English was not their first language, such as a sign spotted in Thailand that reads, **Of clouse, we spoke England!** or the one on a clinic in China that announces the name of the institution in Chinese, but then translates it into English as **Painful Treatment Center of Cancer**. Or this one from Namibia: **Toilet / Stay in Your Car**.

Other signs in the book are from English-speaking countries and created, I assume, by people who have spoken English all their lives, but the signs are just as funny. Here are several examples:

- From Los Angeles, California: **Caution: Blind Drivers Backing Out**.
- From San Diego, California: **Cruise Ships / Use Airport Exit**.
- From Lake District, England: **Barf Bed & Breakfast**.

Some of the best, however, are those that send a mixed message, such as these:

- From Kanab, Utah: **Six Mile Village / 3 miles.**
- From Los Angeles, California: **Antique Tables Made Daily!**
- From Mill Valley, California: A sign reading **Evacuation Route**, with an arrow pointing straight ahead, but on the same post directly above it is another sign reading, **Not a Through Street.**
- From a portable sign in Racine, Wisconsin: **Happy Easter! / We Rent Handguns.**

Perhaps one reason we enjoy the contradictory signs is because contradiction seems to be a characteristic of the more important signs in our lives, too.

Our gospel reading has Jesus talking to his disciples about signs that will precede the return of the Son of Man to earth. He speaks of cosmic changes, signs in the sun, moon and stars, as well as distress among the nations and deep foreboding in the hearts of individuals.

Luke 21:7-28 (The Message)

They asked him, "Teacher, when is this going to happen? What clue will we get that it's about to take place?"

He said, "Watch out for the doomsday deceivers. Many leaders are going to show up with forged identities claiming, 'I'm the One,' or, 'The end is near.' Don't fall for any of that. When you hear of wars and uprisings, keep your head and don't panic. This is routine history and no sign of the end."

He went on, "Nation will fight nation and ruler fight ruler, over and over. Huge earthquakes will occur in various places. There will be famines. You'll think at times that the very sky is falling.

"But before any of this happens, they'll arrest you, hunt you down, and drag you to court and jail. It will go from bad to worse, dog-eat-dog, everyone at your throat because you carry my name. You'll end up on the witness stand, called to testify. Make up your mind right now not to worry about it. I'll give you the words and wisdom that will reduce all your accusers to stammers and stutters.

"You'll even be turned in by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. Some of you will be killed. There's no telling who will hate you because of me. Even so, every detail of your body and soul—even the

hairs of your head!—is in my care; nothing of you will be lost. Staying with it—that's what is required. Stay with it to the end. You won't be sorry; you'll be saved.

"When you see soldiers camped all around Jerusalem, then you'll know that she is about to be devastated. If you're living in Judea at the time, run for the hills. If you're in the city, get out quickly. If you're out in the fields, don't go home to get your coat. This is Vengeance Day—everything written about it will come to a head. Pregnant and nursing mothers will have it especially hard. Incredible misery! Torrential rage! People dropping like flies; people dragged off to prisons; Jerusalem under the boot of barbarians until the nations finish what was given them to do.

"It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

"And then—then!—they'll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!"

But some of us might want to say, "Well, that's fine that you can describe the signs and their meaning, Jesus, but I don't have that kind of certainty when I look at the world.

It seems to me that we've got all kinds of cosmic changes taking place.

tsunami in 2004

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005,

the flooding in Missouri and the rest of the mid-west earlier this year

Global Climate Change

We don't even have to look toward Iraq to find incidents of distress among the nations today.

And when we shut off the evening news, aren't we often left feeling that the sky is about to fall down?

But — and here's our problem — in one form or another, this sort of stuff has been going on for centuries.

So the question is:

What do those signs mean, if anything, other than that life isn't easy?

Is Jesus about to come back or is what we are witnessing just the way things are in a world where good and evil battle it out?

A few years back an older member of my congregation told me that he remembered as a kid hearing a grown man commenting on world troubles in the news at that time and saying “We must be living in the end time!”

That kid is now long since deceased, and the world is still going on. So the troubles back then weren’t signs of the end after all.

What’s more, even our gospel text this morning is contradictory.

Jesus’ comment about signs is part of a conversation with his followers. It began when some of them commented on the magnificent stones used in the building of the temple and Jesus responded by saying that the day would come when not one stone would be left standing.

What sign will signal the coming of that calamity? — Jesus friends ask. Jesus answers by reeling off a list of troubles —

false messiahs,
wars and insurrections,
earthquakes,
famines,
plagues and cosmic disturbances.

But before any of that, his followers will experience persecution, which will also be a sign.

Jerusalem will be surrounded by armies, Jesus says.

But all at once Jesus is talking about these disturbing signs as signals that he is about to return to earth.

You can imagine his hearers’ sudden confusion. “Say what? I thought we were talking about the end of the temple and the city and now you’re speaking of the end of the world?”

And, of course, we know *that* did not happen in A.D. 70, when the temple was destroyed.

Finally, as if to cement the confusion, Jesus says to his hearers,
“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.”

Okaaaay. But which things?

Well, the temple and city, but not the second coming, yet isn't that what Jesus was saying?

Now it's certainly possible that Luke, in reflecting on this story, actually smashed a couple of different topics Jesus discussed together.

But if that's the case, then Luke was having the same kind of trouble we have in distinguishing a crisis near at hand from another one yet to come — trouble making sense of the signs.

If we did not have trouble distinguishing crises, then we would not have times when we think,

“We must be living in the final days” or
 “How can things get worse than they are now?” or
 “The world is going to hell in a hand-basket.”

The people in the first century of Christianity had the same problem, trying to understand what the signs all meant.

What makes it even harder is the reality that it is hard for us to know exactly what the New Testament's words about the second coming even mean.

The first Christians apparently took them quite literally, and many expected Christ to return within their generation.

But 2,000 years later, it's hard for many to know quite what to make of Second-Coming talk. You can only stand gazing eagerly at the sky for so long with nothing happening before you start to feel ridiculous.

And so eventually, if you are a person of faith, you might conclude that perhaps the second coming is not meant to be understood quite so factually but instead as a promise of God's final victory and the full coming of God's kingdom.

But even that is clouded by the ongoing march of time and the endless stream of troublesome happenings on the world stage.

Those troubles could be read as signs (and sometimes are by persons of certain persuasions), but once those troubles are past, they seem in retrospect to not have been signs after all, but simply events, and now part of history.

Yet we cannot dismiss the idea that some events are indeed also signs, and to miss a sign can mean to not be ready for what they point to .

Consider this example:

World War II actually started on September 1, 1939, when Hitler's army invaded Poland, but there was a warning sign before that. Hitler's original plans called for the invasion to begin the preceding week, on August 26. In fact, he had 16 combat units in place and ready by that date. But then, the evening before the 26th, some last-minute developments — including Italy's sudden decision not to help with the invasion — caused Hitler to put his plans on hold. He had word sent out by radio to all his units to come home, but communication technology being what it was in 1939, one unit didn't get the message. Thus, at the stroke of midnight on the 26th, that unit entered Poland and captured a strategic mountain pass and railway, and took some Poles as prisoners. When that unit's leader telephoned headquarters to report the victory, however, he was told of the change of plans. So he released his prisoners and led his unit home.

Naturally, this stumble should have alerted the Polish leaders that Germany was up to no good, but inexplicably, they let the incident pass without recognizing what it meant. Thus, when the Germans did invade Poland on September 1, the Poles were taken by complete surprise, and quickly succumbed. They were not ready.

That idea of not being ready can happen spiritually, too.

An old poem by Lois Blanchard Eades titled "If Jesus Came to Your House" put the idea of Jesus' return in a one-on-one setting.

It begins by asking what you'd want to do if Jesus suddenly announced he was coming to visit at your house for a few days.

- Would you be eager to see him or would you be busy hiding certain materials you'd be embarrassed for him to see?
- Would your family conversation be able to go on as before or would there have to be some coaxing of family members to clean up their act?
- Would you suddenly have to begin using a table grace?
- Would you take him with you all the places you had planned to go and would you want him to meet your closest friends?

The poem ends by asking:

Would you be glad to have him stay forever on and on?

Or would you sigh with great relief when he at last was gone?

That may be a bit too literal for some of us to make much out of, but perhaps it captures some of the anxiety that the idea of missing the signs suggests.

So in attempting to understand and interpret the events of our day, one hazard is that we'll miss the signs altogether.

But a greater danger is that we'll misread them.

We can watch reports of great trouble in the news and look at the difficulties in our own lives and view them as signs that despair is warranted. There are facts that even in the broad sunlight are hard enough to take, but couple them with a dark mood, when all our defenses are down, and they can lead us to lose hope.

It'd be a shame to do that because despair can cause us to miss the most important thing Jesus said in this whole passage. Remember that he was talking to those who were following him, and to them he said,
"Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Or as Peterson puts it:

"When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!"

In other words, Jesus says that *to read the world's troubles only as omens of doom is to misread them.*

Instead, and against all conventional logic, we should see them as foreshadowings of our redemption, advance notices of God's kingdom, in which, as followers of Jesus, we already hold citizenship.

Doom and gloom precede redemption and salvation.

And if that's the case, then the world's tribulations and our personal trials can be understood as reasons for us to remain faithful, hopeful and optimistic in the long view.

And the long view is what is called for.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, tells of having a conversation with the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was so convinced of the universal tendency for humans to abuse power that he was pessimistic about the possibility of society becoming moral. Still, he was not without ultimate hope in God and

believed that individual acts could be conducted on a higher moral level than that of the society in which the individual lived. Fosdick, however, had more confidence in humankind's ability to progress, and thus, he urged Niebuhr to be more optimistic.

Niebuhr responded, "If you will be pessimistic with me decade by decade, I will be optimistic with you aeon by aeon."

That's a hard position to take when we are in the midst of conflict, troubles and threat, for it calls for us to see the good news behind the bad news. But of course, Good News is what the gospel of Jesus means.

As Niebuhr put it elsewhere: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love."

Thus, if we believe Jesus, we should not view life as merely a preparation season for eternity. It is a time to remind ourselves not to misread the calamitous signs in our world as reasons to despair. Rather they are signals to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.

Here we are now at a crossroads in the life of Ridge Church.

How good are we at reading the signs that are all around us?

Reaching Out To The Future did not raise as much as we had hoped

\$100,000 in cash

\$400,000 in pledges

How do we understand what that means?

The answer, like so many others is at odds with what we want.

What kind of sign is it?

Stop sign?

Yield sign?

Caution sign?

Or a work ahead sign?

I guess it depends on what you want to see.

I agree with Reinhold Niebuhr, and with our words to focus story. For me it is a sign to work harder and trust God even more!