

## “The Fig Tree Phenomenon”

Luke 21:25-36

“Look at the fig tree,” says Jesus, “and all the trees” for that matter. “...as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves that summer is already near.” Here in Central New York, of course, we are at a different part of the cycle. All but just a few stubborn hold-outs have lost all their leaves by now, and it will be some time before we see them begin to bud and leaf out again. It is something to look forward to.

What Jesus had in mind was that we should pay attention to the signs of what is coming, of what is around the corner, to think ahead and be prepared. I am one of those people who have trouble thinking ahead. I’m not ready for fall until fall gets here – same with winter. (Actually, I’m never really ready for winter.) I don’t think about purchasing new clothes for the season until the season has arrived, at which point the stores have taken those clothes off their shelves and put out clothes for the next season. I’ve never really gotten the hang of that, so to speak. I have a built in lag. And so, once again, I find myself unprepared for the arrival of Advent, one of whose main themes is that or being prepared. Advent and the ensuing celebration of Christmas always seem to come before I am ready for them. Early indicators began appearing nearly two months ago, but I am just now coming to terms with it all.

Jesus spoke of the fig tree, but it is the Christmas tree, among other things in our culture, that is the harbinger at this time of year of things to come. The Douglas Firs, the Scotch Pines, the Blue Spruces....Were Jesus living in our day he might have said, “When you see the tree being hauled on that big semi truck through the streets of New York City into Rockefeller Center, you know that Christmas is just around the corner.” Or “when you hear the Christmas music playing over the loudspeakers at the shopping mall,” or “when you get an early Christmas card” (as we did last week), then you know that the time is drawing near.

And that is what our passage from Luke for this morning is all about – it is about paying attention to the signs, getting ourselves ready, watching for whatever it is that is about to arrive. Jesus indicates that what is arriving in this case is the Kingdom of God. “...when you see these things take place, you know that the Kingdom of God is near.”

What are “these things?” Mark says they include “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars...” Well, I don’t know that we have seen any signs in those heavenly bodies, but we certainly have seen more of them than those living in Jesus’ day could ever have imagined. It turns out, as we were informed recently, there is water on the moon. Who knew? Last week the Cassini spacecraft, that has been orbiting Saturn for the last five plus years, came within 1,000 miles of one of Saturn’s moons and got dramatic pictures of water vapor spewing from fissures in the south polar region. The ancients didn’t even know that Saturn had moons, much less that some of them had fissures in their polar regions. What might the readers of Mark in the first and second centuries have thought of that, I wonder.

Another sign? “Distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.” I suppose one could find a correlation with the awful tsunami just six years ago this December, or with the dire predictions related to global warming, the possibility of the polar ice caps melting and the rising of the sea levels.

And then there is that prediction about “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” “Look at the fig tree,” Jesus said. Look for the signs of the times.

Why is it that of all the many admonitions that Jesus is reported to have offered in the Gospels, this one, about paying attention to the signs of the times, seems to be among the top few taken most seriously by at least some of his followers? In every generation since Christ, his people have been looking for the signs, looking for those buds on the fig tree. And they have found them seemingly everywhere imaginable.

One could wish that Jesus' followers down through the centuries would have taken some of his other words equally as seriously, given them as much attention: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6:27-28) If the same energy that has gone into looking for the signs of the times had gone into some of the other words of Christ, the world would by now be a better place.

But there are many who seem to focus on looking for these signs and who take all of this quite literally. Like literalists in every century since Christ, they have found signs of the end times almost everywhere they have looked. A man by the name of Roland Weinland has a book out entitled, *2008 – God's Final Witness*, in which he says that the end of the world will come on May 27, 2012.<sup>1</sup> I will go out on a limb and make a prediction of my own. I predict that on May 28, 2012, Mr. Weinland will be reconsidering his prediction.

Some others are giving the world a little longer and are predicting the end of the world to come on December 21 of that year, based upon the fact that that is the end date of the 5,125 year long count Mayan calendar. The current disaster movie, *2012*, is based upon that idea.

Other calendar anomalies have also been fodder for end of the world theories. Round numbers (AD 500, 1000, 1500, and as we can all recall, 2000 – remember Y2K?) have always given rise to these predictions. As the year 1000 AD approached there were many predictions of the end of the world. According to one source, "Christian armies waged war against some of the Pagan countries in Northern Europe. The motivation was to convert them all to Christianity, by force if necessary, before Christ returned in the year 1000. Meanwhile, some Christians had given their possessions to the Church in anticipation of the end."<sup>2</sup>

During the black plague in Europe people were, understandably perhaps, thinking that it was the end of the world. Currently even the Swine Flu pandemic has set some people off. Someone named Tami writes: "We are in the last days before the Rapture.... We will see more terror and pestilence the closer we come, but the time is short, do not delay, be ready to go with Jesus forever, it can happen anytime, do not wait!"

On a site called, *Rapture Ready*, someone has prepared a Rapture Index. The rapture is the relatively new concept that Christ will appear in the clouds and all of the Christians will be whisked away. (The popular book and movie series, *Left Behind*, is based upon that idea.) The idea of the Rapture Index, according to the website, is not to predict the rapture but to "measure the type of activity that could act as a precursor to the rapture." Thus if the index is below 100, that indicates "slow prophetic activity." Then there is a moderate and a heavy category, and anything over 160 is labeled, "Fasten your seat belts." As of last Tuesday the index was set at 167.

And again I can't help wondering what would happen if all of the energy of Christian people that has gone into predictions of the return of Christ or the end of the world would go instead into trying to make this world a better place.

Joanna M. Adams, pastor of Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, says: "Our present day is rife with millennialists who drool over the prospect of the end of the world. Many of them are motivated less by hope for the world than by the desire to see those whom they consider to be among God's unfavored get their just desserts. A friend of mine once saw a sign in front of a bait shop on a country road that read: 'Smile! Our God is a consuming fire!'"<sup>3</sup>

Another person, Barbara Rossing, has spoken of the "voyeuristic violence" that characterizes some of the so called Christian novels of the end times such as the *Left Behind* series, mentioned earlier, that has sold over 60 million books.<sup>4</sup>

I like what the late *Peanuts* comic strip author, Charles Schultz says: "Don't worry about the world coming to an end today. It's already tomorrow in Australia."<sup>5</sup>

Is there a way to take this passage seriously without falling into this trap? Is there a way for us, as Christian people, to be watchful without becoming distracted by all of this hype?

One day recently at the Cayuga Home I asked the boys what they thought was the biggest question in life? What do you think about when you are in bed getting ready to sleep? There were a variety of answers. One, to be funny, said, "which came first, the chicken or the egg." Another, seriously, said that before he went to sleep each night he thought a lot about heaven or hell and he was hoping that he would be going to heaven. Another boy said that the biggest question for him was whether he was not only alive, but also really living his life or not.

I could be wrong, but it seems to me that the signs we ought to be looking for are not plagues, round numbers and international events but the good that takes place on a daily basis all around us. These are the signs of God's presence among us, of Emmanuel, of God being with us. It seems to me that we are called not to speculation but to action, and to hope centered not on an escape from the suffering of the world, but on the possibility of helping to create a better world with less suffering.

The story is told of Martin Luther the Reformer in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that he was planting a tree when someone asked him what he would do if he knew that today was the end of the world. He is reported to have said: "I would keep on planting this tree."

"During the colonial period in American history, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard. In the midst of general panic a motion was made to adjourn, but one of the legislators stood up and said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let candles be brought." Joanna Adams, who tells this story, ends by saying: "Bring on the Advent candles, and let's live in love and act in hope until our Lord comes again.

<sup>1</sup> <http://the-end.com>

<sup>2</sup> [religioustolerance.org](http://religioustolerance.org)

<sup>3</sup> *Living by the word: light the candles*, Christian Century, Nov 28, 2006 by Joanna M. Adams

<sup>4</sup> *The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself*, Reflections By Dan Clendenin, 11/27/06

<sup>5</sup> found on [religioustolerance.org](http://religioustolerance.org)