

Luke 21: 25-36

WHEN I WAS A CHILD ONE OF THE SIGNS I ALWAYS LOOKED FORWARD TO WAS MY ADVENT CALENDAR. EVERY YEAR ABOUT THIS TIME MY BROTHER AND I WERE GIVEN A NEW ADVENT CALENDAR FROM OUR GRANDPARENTS. IT WAS USUALLY A BEAUTIFUL PICTURE THAT HAD MANY LITTLE NUMBERED DOORS, ONE FOR EACH DAY OF ADVENT. EACH DAY WE WOULD OPEN A LITTLE DOOR ON THE CALENDAR. BEHIND THE DOOR WAS A BIBLE VERSE, PART OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY, OR A CHURCHY PICTURE. AND THERE WERE CHOCOLATES. EACH DOOR WE OPENED WAS A SIGN CHRISTMAS WAS GETTING CLOSER. WE WERE COUNTING DOWN THE DAYS. THAT'S WHAT ADVENT WAS ABOUT. I LIKED ADVENT. I LIKED THE WAY OUR HOUSE LOOKED DECORATED. ADVENT WAS A TIME OF EXPECTATION, ANTICIPATION, AND EXCITEMENT. YES, IT MEANT JESUS WOULD BE BORN IN BETHLEHEM BUT IT ALSO MEANT THE JCPENNEY AND SEARS CHRISTMAS CATALOGS ARRIVING, GRANDPARENTS VISITING, PRESENTS AND SANTA CLAUS. I LOOKED FORWARD TO THE FUTURE ONE DAY AT A TIME. AS A CHILD THOSE WERE MY SIGNS CHRISTMAS WAS COMING.

THEN SOMETHING HAPPENED. SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY LIFE GOT REAL AND ADVENT CHANGED. ADVENT WAS NO LONGER JUST THE SEASON BEFORE CHRISTMAS, A COUNTDOWN. INSTEAD IT WAS INTERMINGLED WITH THE REALITY OF MY LIFE AND WORLD. THE GOSPEL TEXT WARNING OF THE 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 FEAR AND FOREBODING OF WHAT IS COMING UPON THE WORLD, FOR THE POWERS OF THE HEAVENS WILL BE SHAKEN. THESE WORDS TOOK ON NEW AND OFTEN VERY PERSONAL MEANINGS. SPECIFIC ADVENTS BECAME A SEASON OF CHANGE, LETTING GO, AND LOOKING TO A FUTURE THAT WAS NOT YET CLEAR OR KNOWN. I'M NOT SURE WHEN IT BEGAN OR HOW IT HAPPENED BUT I KNOW IT DID.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE PAIN AND BROKENNESS MY BROTHER, PARENTS AND I SHARED DURING OUR LAST CHRISTMAS TOGETHER BEFORE MY PARENTS DIVORCED. I REMEMBER OPENING MY GIFTS CRYING. "THERE WILL BE SIGNS," JESUS SAID.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE CHRISTMAS EVE AT HENNEPIN UMC LOOKING OUT AT A FULL CONGREGATION AS THEIR SENIOR PASTOR, TEARS IN MY EYES, WONDERING HOW MY LIFE GOT TO THAT POINT. I HAD EVERYTHING I WANTED AND WANTED NOTHING I HAD. I HAD DONE ALL THE RIGHT THINGS AND WORKED SO HARD TO GET WHERE I WAS YET EVERYTHING FELT EMPTY. "THERE WILL BE SIGNS," JESUS SAID.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE ADVENT I WAS UNPACKING THE GRANDCHILDREN'S CHRISTMAS STOCKINGS AND CAME UPON THE NEVER USED ONE FOR OUR GRANDSON'S FIRST CHRISTMAS. A CHRISTMAS THAT NEVER HAPPENED FOR HIM AS HE WAS BORN TOO SOON AND ONLY LIVED A SHORT TIME. THERE WILL BE SIGNS, JESUS SAID.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN READING THE HEADLINES OR WATCHING THE NEWS AND FEELING LIKE MY PRAYERS WERE UNABLE TO KEEP UP WITH THE PAIN AND NEEDS OF THE WORLD. “THERE WILL BE SIGNS,” JESUS SAID.

THESE ARE JUST A FEW OF MY ADVENT STORIES, STORIES OF HOW MY LIFE HAS BEEN CHANGED AND THE WORLD AS I HAD KNOWN IT ENDED. AND I WONDERED WHAT’S NEXT AND HAD TO START OVER. WHAT ARE YOUR ADVENT STORIES? I’LL BET YOU HAVE THEM. I’LL BET YOU COULD TELL STORIES ABOUT THE DAY YOUR LIFE CHANGED AND YOUR WORLD ENDED. I’LL BET YOU HAVE LIVED THROUGH SEASONS OF CHANGE, LETTING GO, AND STEPPING INTO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE, MAYBE EVEN A FUTURE YOU DID NOT WANT.

I SOMETIMES WISH ADVENT WAS AS SIMPLE AND EASY AS OPENING A LITTLE DOOR ON THE CALENDAR, EATING A PIECE OF CHOCOLATE, AND KNOWING CHRISTMAS IS ONE DAY CLOSER. BUT IT’S NOT. WE ALL KNOW THE WORLD IS NOT THAT SIMPLE AND LIFE IS NOT THAT EASY. MAYBE THAT’S WHY EVERY YEAR ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, WE HEAR A GOSPEL TEXT THAT SEEMS TO DESCRIBE THE END OF THE WORLD AND THE SIGNS THAT WILL ACCOMPANY THAT ENDING. THIS IS NOT JUST A STORY ABOUT JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES. THIS IS YOUR STORY AND MY STORY. THIS IS OUR STORY. WE EXPERIENCE IT IN OUR LIVES. WE SEE IT IN OUR WORLD. AND TODAY THE CHURCH DECLARES IT TO BE THE GOOD NEWS OF CHRIST.

“THERE WILL BE SIGNS,” JESUS SAID. MORE THAN EVER OUR WORLD NEEDS TO SEE SIGNS. THE LONGER I LIVE, THE MORE I SEE AND EXPERIENCE, THE MORE I REALIZE HOW NECESSARY THOSE SIGNS ARE. I WANT TO BE REMINDED THAT THE SIGNS ARE THERE.

EVERY ADVENT STORY IS ACCOMPANIED BY SIGNS. JESUS SAYS IF WE LOOK WE’LL SEE THE SIGNS EVERYWHERE, IN THE SUN, THE MOON, THE STARS; IN THE DISTRESSING AMONG THE NATIONS; AND IN THE ROARING OF THE SEA AND ITS WAVES. “THERE WILL BE SIGNS” ARE WORDS OF HOPE AND REASSURANCE BUT OFTEN ARE ONLY COMMUNICATED AS WORDS OF WARNING AND THREAT. WHEN THEY ARE ONLY COMMUNICATED AS IMPENDING DOOM AND LOSS, WE ARE PUSHED FURTHER INTO THE DARKNESS AND DEEPER INTO OUR FEAR. OUR MISUSE OF THE SIGNS BLIND US TO THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN WITH POWER AND GREAT GLORY.

“THERE WILL BE SIGNS” ARE NOT JESUS’ WORDS OF WARNING AND THREATS. JESUS DOES NOT ASK US TO PREDICT THE FUTURE. HE NEVER SAYS THESE ARE THE SIGNS THAT THE END OF THE WORLD HAS COME. INSTEAD, HE SAYS THAT WHEN WE SEE THE SIGNS WE ARE TO STAND UP, RAISE OUR HEADS, AND KNOW THAT HELP IS ON THE WAY; OUR REDEMPTION, OUR HEALING, OUR SAVIOR HAS DRAWN NEAR. WHEN OUR WORLDS SHAKE, WHEN WE PERSONALLY BEGIN TO CRUMBLE, WE ARE REMINDED TO RAISE OUR HEADS, STAND UP AND

KNOW THAT GOD IS DRAWING NEAR TO US. GOD HAS NOT ABANDONED US, GOD NOTICES US, GOD CARES, COMES TO US, AND PARTICIPATES IN OUR LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES.

JESUS' PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE TEACHES US HOW TO READ THE SIGNS. THE ADVENT SIGNS ARE AS ORDINARY AND COMMON AS A FIG TREE SPROUTING LEAVES. WE SEE THE LEAVES AND WE KNOW SOMETHING IS HAPPENING. SUMMER IS ALREADY NEAR. IT'S A NEW SEASON, WITH NEW LIFE, NEW GROWTH. THAT IS THE PROMISE AND GOOD NEWS OF THE ADVENT SIGNS. AND YET THAT PROMISE, THAT GOOD NEWS, IS FULFILLED NOT APART FROM BUT IN AND THROUGH THE REALITY OF OUR LIFE'S CIRCUMSTANCES AND OUR WORLD'S EVENTS, NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT OR TRAGIC THEY MAY BE.

THE WORD 'ADVENT' LITERALLY MEANS ARRIVAL. IT HAS BEEN OBSERVED FOR CENTURIES AS A TIME TO CONTEMPLATE CHRIST'S BIRTH, BUT MOST PEOPLE TODAY ACKNOWLEDGE IT ONLY WITH A BLANK LOOK. FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF PEOPLE, DECEMBER FLIES BY IN A FLURRY OF ACTIVITIES, AND WHAT IS CALLED THE "HOLIDAY SEASON" TURNS OUT TO BE THE MOST STRESSFUL TIME OF THE YEAR.

EVEN THOSE WHO GENUINELY LOVE CHRISTMAS..OFTEN MISS THE POINT. CONTENT WITH CANDLES AND CAROLS AND GOOD FOOD, THEY BASK IN THE WARMTH OF FAMILIAR TRADITIONS, IN RECIPROCATED ACTS OF KINDNESS, AND FEELINGS OF GENERAL GOODWILL. HOW MANY THOUGH REMEMBER THE HARSH REALITIES OF CHRIST'S FIRST COMING: THE DANK STABLE, THE COLD NIGHT, THE CLOSED DOOR OF THE INN? HOW MANY SHARE THE LONGING OF THE ANCIENT PROPHETS, WHO AWAITED THE MESSIAH WITH SUCH ACHING INTENSITY THAT THEY FORESAW HIS ARRIVAL THOUSANDS OF YEARS BEFORE HE WAS BORN?

THE GOOD NEWS OF ADVENT IS NOT SIMPLY THAT CHRIST IS COMING, BUT THAT HIS COMING MEANS WE CAN HOPE, DESPITE ALL THAT IS FALLING APART IN OUR LIVES, OUR COMMUNITIES, AND THE WORLD AROUND US. LET US REMEMBER THIS ADVENT THAT WE ARE NOT CELEBRATING A BEAUTIFUL MYTH, NO LOVELY PIECE OF TRADITIONAL FOLKLORE, BUT A SOLEMN FACT. GOD HAS BEEN HERE ONCE HISTORICALLY IN THE BIRTH OF CHRIST. NOTHING CAN ALTER THE FACT THAT WE LIVE ON A VISITED PLANET. TODAY WE TESTIFY HE WILL COME AGAIN AT A TIME WE DON'T KNOW. BUT WE ALSO TESTIFY THAT HE WILL COME AGAIN WITH THE SAME SILENCE AND THE SAME GENTLE HUMILITY INTO ANY HUMAN HEART READY TO RECEIVE HIM. THAT IS A TRUTH EACH OF MY ADVENT STORIES HOLDS..GOD NEVER ABANDONED ME. GOD CONTINUES TO COME INTO ANY HUMAN HEART READY TO RECEIVE HIM. IS YOUR HEART READY?