

Camille L. Cook
Baptism
Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14
Luke 21:25-36

First Sunday of Advent
November 28, 2010
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Washington, DC

One day at a busy airport, the passengers had all boarded onto a plane and were seated waiting for the pilot to arrive so they could take off. The pilot and co-pilot finally appeared in the rear of the plane and begin walking up to the cockpit through the centre aisle. Both of the pilots appeared to be blind; the pilot was using a white cane, bumping into passenger's right and left as he stumbled down the aisle. The co-pilot was using a guide dog. Both had their eyes covered with dark glasses. At first, the passengers did not react thinking that it must be some sort of practical joke. But after a few minutes, the engines started revving, and the airplane began moving down the runway. The passengers looked at each other with some uneasiness. They started whispering among themselves and looked desperately to the stewardesses for reassurance. Yet, the plane started accelerating rapidly, and people began to panic. As the plane was getting closer and closer to the end of the runway, the people became more and more hysterical. When the plane had less than twenty feet of runway left, everyone started screaming. At the very last moment, the plane took off and was airborne. Up in the cockpit, the co-pilot said to the pilot: "You know, one of these days the passengers are not going to scream, and we will no idea when to take off!"

We all rely on signs and sounds to help us navigate our way through the world. We all know that a flashing red man means not to cross the road. Clouds in the sky mean we should bring an umbrella. Bells in the morning means church is about to begin.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus draws upon signs to illustrate his message to the disciples. Jesus wants to explain to them that a heavenly change is going to take place and so he draws on cosmic signs like the sun and the moon and the stars. And then to bring his message to their level he calls on the sign of a fig tree. To the disciples, seeing a fig tree would have been a daily sighting and its sprouting leaves would have been an expected seasonal change. Jesus used this common sign to teach the disciples that they should be expecting such a change, not a seasonal change but a cosmic change. God's kingdom was coming; redemption for God's people was not far off. The signs of the times said get ready, something is happening, change is in the air!

Theologian Paul Tillich in his book *Dynamics of Faith* says that we need signs and their symbols to point to the deeper, ultimate realities of our faith. Words alone are not sufficient to describe the divine and divine occurrences. Tillich believes signs are useful because they have the power to point beyond themselves to something greater, something deeper, something mysterious. Think of the power a flag can hold to elicit patriotism, pride, and community. It is not the sign that is important but rather the power of the symbol it describes.

In Washington, we do not see fig trees sprouting leaves but we do see other signs that the season is indeed changing. Christmas lights on M streets, pine trees for sale on Wisconsin Avenue, carols heard overhead in coffee shops. For us, these are very common and expected seasonal signs but they point to the uncommon experience that is not far off. This is a holy season and these common Christmas signs are not

just there for decoration. The signs of the season should call us into a deeper awareness of what is going on in our lives of faith.

We need these signs otherwise we are like the blind pilots who are sitting there and not knowing quite what to do next. We need signs to say, come on, pay attention, things are changing! Jesus explains to the disciples that when they see these signs they need to be vigilant with their thoughts and actions. Jesus says in verse 34, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." Dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of this life, it seems that is what the Christmas season is all about. This time of year we love to over indulge, over consume, over extend ourselves, and then to make it all worse we worry! We worry about paying our bills, we worry about getting everything done on time, we worry about making our year end goals, we worry about spending enough time with our families, we worry that the year ahead will be filled with more stress and hardship. But Jesus says you are missing the point, you see the signs but you miss the symbols.

Just last week we were surrounded with the signs of Thanksgiving - the turkey and pumpkin pie and the stuffing. And so it was slightly jarring on Friday morning to walk down the street and find that the garland has been hung from the lampposts. This year we have very little down time. It is here, Advent has begun, and the signs are now pointing us towards Christmas. As people of faith, we should not begrudge this. We should use the signs of the seasons to prompt us towards a deeper relationship with God. To prompt us towards a more generous spirit. To prompt us to do something charitable and selfless. To prompt us towards the peace and joy God intended for the world on Christmas morning.

Jesus says be alert, do not be caught off guard, be prayerful, and keep your head up. If we are not on guard then the depth and beauty of the season, of this next fast and furious month will pass us by and we will be left with empty signs that have brought us only extra stress and hassle and disappointment.

My great-grandmother Ida Cook was born in 1881 in London but moved to the United States when she was a teenager. In 1972, as a 90th birthday present she travelled on the QEII for her first and only visit to London. When she returned to the United States, my father asked her if she found the trip interesting. She shrugged and said, "Not really, I've seen it all before!"

My great-grandmother's attitude is one that is too easy to adopt. "We have seen it all before!" We have seen the children's nativities, we have sung the carols, we have decorated the trees. If we are not on guard the signs of the season can lose their ability to remind us of what they symbolize, God's great gift to the world. Baby Jesus in the stable is not another cute Christmas decoration, baby Jesus is the powerful symbol that says God is for us, that God so loved the world, that light came into our darkness. In Advent, our whole frame of reference changes as we orientate our lives once again towards God's great gift to the world that came on Christmas morning.

This time last year I was setting up the church for the school's carol service and a mother had come early and was sitting in one of the pews. She was drinking a large Starbucks coffee and speaking quite loudly on her phone while flipping through a glamour magazine. I went up to the woman and said, "excuse me ma'am, drinks and

mobile phones are not allowed in the sanctuary.” Her response to me was, “who do you think you are?” My response to her was, “where do you think you are?”

That woman saw the signs of the seasons but she was missing their symbols.

This is a holy time, a holy place, a holy season. This is not business as usual.

New Testament scholar Dianne Bergant says, "The Advent way of life does not necessarily require unusual behavior on our part, but it calls us to live the usual unusually well." Living the usual unusually well can mean bringing canned goods for the local pantry, it can mean spending time with someone you have been too busy to see, it can mean saying thank you to someone who cleans your house or empties your trash or sweeps your streets, it can mean making a mends in a relationship that has become fractured. These are usual things but in this holy season they have the power to symbolize unusual graces.

We can use the signs of the season to tell others what we believe in and hopefully the signs we use will be point beyond themselves to Christ. So we send the cards with words of hope and love, we give thoughtful gifts that tell of our appreciation and thankfulness, we support those causes that bring the good news to God's people. We strive to live the usual unusually well and we pray that the signs of the season will point beyond us, to something deeper, something divine. The signs are changing, Christ is coming, people get ready! Amen.