

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
1 December 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
First Sunday of Advent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Signs of the Season”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Luke 21:25-36

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

I don't know how things go down at your house, but in the Scalfaro household, the day after Thanksgiving is spent switching out the “signs of the season.” Pumpkins are composted and fall décor is boxed up, as Christmas decorations descend from the attic (dust and all!) Damon was up on the roof, hanging the Christmas lights on the house, while I worked inside, decorating with Christmas Cards from years past and putting up nativity scenes and setting out Christmas books and Christmas dish towels.

Friday night Damon and I made hot cocoa, we got in the car, turned on Christmas music, and headed to Home Depot to go look for our Christmas tree, expecting it to take a bit to find the tree and preparing ourselves to enjoy the evening as an ‘outing.’ I had my heated gloves and big sleeping bag type coat on and everything! Sometimes we end up needing to go to

several locations (including outdoor lots) to find our tree, but not this year. Wouldn't you know we found our tree in record time! The very first tree we looked at was “The One”—and we both knew it right away. Perfect height for our house. No gaps or holes. Super fragrant. Healthy needles.

We set it to the side, and I suppose out of a feeling of obligation and habit we pulled a few other trees out and looked them over—they were too short or too tall height or the holes in their branches, until one of us said, “*What are we doing? We found our tree. Let's just get it and go.*”

When we got in the car with the tree loaded up, still surprised that we were in and out of there in seven minutes, Damon said, probably sensing this was different than what I expected the evening to be, “*You know, we could go back in and look around at other decorations and*

stuff if you want.” But I was like, “No, I’m good. Let’s go home.”

Sometimes we make things harder than they need to be, don’t we? Sometimes a “sign” is right in front of us, but we miss its meaning if we’re not careful. The truth is, this is a year when we don’t have a ton of spare time, we could use a ‘win’ right now so finding a Christmas tree in 5 minutes feels like a win! We got home early and got to bed early! I hope that all Advent this tree will be a “sign” of simplicity and ease. But I know it will be more than just a sign.

Damon and I both worked yesterday, so the tree is still sitting undecorated in our living room. Tonight, we’ll share in our annual tree decorating ritual. We take turns putting ornaments on the tree, telling the story of each ornament—where we got it, who gave it to us, etc. Some ornaments have more complex stories, like the miniature cabin ornament from YMCA of the Rockies, where we write the name of the different cabins we’ve stayed in with the year. Some are simpler; Damon loves Wawa so much and misses that about the East Coast, so the last time we were in Jersey, before he could throw away his paper

Wawa coffee cup, I slipped off the cardboard sleeve and kept it, put a paperclip through it and made it into an ornament. Memories like that make this ritual fun. We each hang three ornaments at a time, then switch. It’s nice to reminisce.

Tonight, once our tree is decorated, this “sign of the season” will be transformed, ornament by ornament, into the “story of our lives.”

It’s when the “Signs of the Season” become the “Story of our Lives” that we know we’re a bit closer to understanding what Advent is all about.

Because if the ‘signs’ of the season are not pointing us to the ‘story’ of the season, then they are not ‘signs’ at all—they are ‘distractions’ at best, or ‘stumbling blocks’ at worst.

I wonder how many ‘signs’ of the season we pass by, missing their meaning? Missing what they are pointing to? Missing how they unlock yet another part of God’s story as it unfolds in our lives?

There have always been signs in Jesus’ life; the gospels are full of them. Luke writes in chapter two, *“And this will be a sign to*

you, you will find a babe, wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger,” (Luke 2:12). Or remember the magi? *“For we have seen his star in the east, and have followed it as a sign...”* (Matt. 2:2).

At the beginning of Jesus’ life people speak about the signs that point *to him*; and now, here at the end of his life in Luke 21, Jesus is saying *to others*, *“There will be signs.”* Signs that you see external to you (in nature)—in the sun, moon, stars, and seas. Signs that you feel very personally within you—fear, fainting, foreboding, visions. Signs that you do not understand—the heavens shaking, and quoting the apocalyptic book Daniel, *“the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory.”* This is very different than the Son of Man coming in a stable with a bunch of manure and hay!

As always, context matters here in understanding these verses. Luke is writing a couple decades after 70 CE; the Temple has been destroyed, disciples and early Jesus-followers have been killed and are being persecuted. They are a minority people in a minority religion, being oppressed by a huge, powerful Empire. That’s the

cultural/historical context. And the narrative context of when Jesus is speaking is that he’s headed into the last week of his life when he’ll be crucified and the cloth will tear in the Temple, and there will be an earthquake at his death, and the world, the ‘heavens’ will literally shake...these events are less than a week away when Jesus speaks here in Luke 21.

So whether you locate this narrative in the textual outline of Jesus’ life or whether you locate it in Luke’s social, historical, cultural context when he’s writing it, or whether you locate it in OUR day as modern readers who feel our earth quaking and the seas rising, nations confused and reacting in fear—causing war, genocide, terrorism, people isolated and depressed with weighed down hearts, people addicted to substances to numb them out to the worries of this life—in Jesus’ day, in Luke’s day, and in our day, Jesus is not saying, *“bad stuff will happen and that’s when you know it’s the end,”* Jesus is saying: *“Stuff is really bad already. You are suffering. I see it, I feel it, and I am suffering too. The signs of the suffering are all around you externally...and I know you feel them internally too...the fear,*

the worry, the weighed down hearts...The suffering is a sign..."

The suffering is a sign?!

The suffering is a sign.

But it's not a sign of the end of the world like they are thinking of it...or as we might think of it.

Rather, Jesus is saying that when we suffer, as we suffer, can we see within our suffering a sign that reminds us that "our redemption is drawing near," that "the kingdom of God is near," that if we're alert we'll see that "though the earth passes away, my words will never pass away." I am still here, Jesus says. God is here. God is near.

Remember that story from two weeks ago with the stones of the temple tumbling down? This is the same idea. Where there are birth pangs and labor pains, new life is coming. Contrary to our consumer culture, the "signs of the season" are not all about celebration, they include suffering too.

And the suffering signs are signs that points us to a larger story. The story of God's presence with us. Emmanuel, *God with us*.

So even as this text comes at the END of Jesus' life, it points us back to his beginning.

Advent, which is Latin for "coming" or "arrival," is not just about waiting for Jesus to be born in a manger *back then*, but cultivating the birth of Christ in our lives *today*. It's about seeing the signs of what is happening around us and within us, even the signs of suffering, and finding strength and hope in the truth that *God is with us—Emmanuel*—through it all.

If we see suffering as a sign of doom, we will cave to its effects and cower in fear and dissolve in worry. But if we see suffering as a sign that reminds us that the world is not yet as it should be and God is still with us nonetheless, then we will keep working to create a new and different world and way of being. We will find hope, peace, joy, and love *IN* our suffering, as Jesus did, which is the essence of the Good News. Rather than telling ourselves a false story that we have to wait until our suffering ends *BEFORE* we can experience Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

I wonder, how much time have we 'wasted' waiting for our

suffering to end to feel okay in life instead of using our seasons of suffering to cultivate a new kind of ‘nearness to God?’

It's all about how we interpret the signs. Does the sign lead us to resign ourselves to the way things are and always will be? Or does the sign lead us to remember the Story of God's Redemptive Love and that Death and Pain is not the end?

Advent is not a ‘countdown’ to a birthday party for Jesus, it's an invitation to an entirely new way of being for us and our world that is continually unfolding and dependent upon our cultivation, not just our celebration.

The ‘signs of the season’ are not solely ones of celebration; they may be signs of suffering too. But whether signs of suffering or celebration, they all can point us to the story of Christ, the truth of God drawing near to us.

Think about it. You've had plenty of Advent moments in your life. Moments where something new was ‘coming’ or ‘arriving’ into your life, but before the new thing came or arrived, there was a season of uncertainty or suffering or pain before it. Something had to fall

away. Someone died. A job was lost. A hope was squashed. A dream deferred. Advent moments in our lives, are the moments that feel like the entire world is crashing around us...we are disoriented in the unfamiliarity and newness. Even in the Christmas story, there is this Advent period of disorientation that comes before the celebration: Mary learns that that she's going to have a baby when she's so young and doesn't know what to make of it. Joseph learns that Mary is going to have a baby and he's not the father and wants to ‘dismiss her quietly.’

Before the Advent of something new in our lives, there are seasons of suffering and disorientation and change.

Advent moments like:

- The diagnosis that changes the whole trajectory of your future, your family, your dreams and desires.
- The 30 day notice that you have to be out of your apartment.
- The 2 week notice that your position is being cut; there's been restructuring and downsizing.
- The sudden death of someone you thought would be in your life “forever” (or

at least, “the foreseeable future”)

- The day you wake up and realize you just can’t keep living as you are—the relationship isn’t working; the job is too stressful; the house is too big to keep up with now that your older

Every “Advent” begins with some kind of grief or goodbye. Even with the announcement of a pregnancy, perhaps a long awaited one, there is a moment of grief, of realizing—our lives will never be the same now—we have a little person that will be dependent on us, it won’t just be the ‘two of us’, etc. A new job or opportunity begins with having to say goodbye to a current job, and even if the circumstances were not ideal, almost always there is still at least something you will miss...a certain co-worker, the easy commute, the mission of the organization.

Advent stories are stories about our lives changing. In big ways and small. Advent seasons are seasons of change, of letting go, of dealing with a future you didn’t choose or want, or maybe a future you chose, but that is

still scary and uncertain because it’s unknown.

In this way, as one pastor put it, “I wish Advent was as simple and easy as opening a little door on a calendar, eating a piece of chocolate, and knowing that Christmas (or the nearness of God) is one day closer. But it’s not. You and I both know the world is not that simple and life is not that easy. And maybe that’s why every year on this First Sunday of Advent, we always 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. We experience it in our lives.”¹ What feels like our life is ending, is really just the beginning of a new chapter that has yet to be written.

“*There will be signs,*” Jesus said. 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 distress among earth’s nations; and in the roaring of the sea and its waves. Maybe you can now see the signs that came before your

¹ Michael K. Marsh, “There Will Be Signs – An Advent Sermon on Luke 21:25-36,” *Interrupting the Silence* (30 Nov. 2015), accessed on Dec. 1, 2024 at

<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2015/11/30/there-will-be-signs-an-advent-sermon-on-luke-2125-36/>.

relationship ended, or the signs that came before you officially got the diagnosis, or the signs that were around you before you got the 2 week notice. We see signs of the world's anguish in pictures of refugees and in the images of children who are hungry, children in war zones. "The signs are everywhere and they are not hard to spot. They are, however, too easily and quickly misunderstood and misused."²

"*'There will be signs'* are words of hope and reassurance but far too often they are heard as words of warning and threat. And when they are, the signs are used to predict a future of impending doom and loss. They become indicators that the world will end and you better shape up or God is going to get you. When we misunderstand what Jesus is saying, we start to interpret bad or hard events as things that push us further into fear. Our misuse of the signs blinds us to the coming of the Son of Man with power and great glory"³ and keeps us from realizing that this is the same power that humbled itself as a baby, the same glory that gave the angelic hosts their song at Jesus' birth.

² Marsh, *ibid.*

³ Marsh, *ibid.*

"*'There will be signs'* are not Jesus' words of warning and threats. Jesus does not 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 have drawn near."⁴ These signs are words of encouragement and instruction for our suffering world.

"The signs are not a reason to hang our head in despair or shrink from life. That we can [even] see the signs in our lives and world means that the circumstances we face and the events that happen still contain and reveal the promise of Christ's coming," and that they include an invitation to be co-creators and co-authors in the story of God's Love, Peace, Hope, and Joy in the world. "The signs are our hope and reassurance that God has not abandoned us, that God notices us, that God cares, comes to, and participates in our life's circumstances."⁵ The signs remind us of the Story that saves our lives: Emmanuel, *God with us*.

⁴ Marsh, *ibid.*

⁵ Marsh, *ibid.*

“The Advent signs are as ordinary and common as a fig tree sprouting leaves, [Jesus says]. We see the leaves and we know something is happening. Summer is already near. It’s a new season, with new life, new growth, new fruit. 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. So, what if we looked on our lives and our world and we began to read and understand the signs in our Advent stories as sprouting leaves?”⁶ As indicators of new life? How would we see things differently? Or create meaning in new ways?

It might lead us to understand that the kin-dom of God is near. It might mean we are entering a new season, or have a chance for new life and new growth. Doors of our life might open in new ways, doors that lead to courage and confidence. We might look on the world with a new sense of compassion and hope. We might be strengthened to do the work God has given us

to do, or if we are at the end of our lives, be encouraged to ‘let go and rest in God’s love.’

“Yes, the Advent seasons of our lives can be long, difficult, and painful. But we never face them without the signs of hope and reassurance, signs that point to the one who is coming.

‘There will be signs,’ Jesus said,”⁷ even as he was preparing his disciples for his death. The signs will always be here to remind you of my life, my Story, and God’s Love.

The truth is—the entire story of our faith, the story of Jesus—is a story of God drawing near to us by taking on human form, Jesus, Emmanuel, *God with us*. Through Jesus’ experiences growing up and living and suffering and dying—by experiencing what we experience—and then rising again—Jesus shows us that suffering and death do not have the last word. Life does. Hope does. Peace does. Joy does. Love does. There is a new kin-dom at hand, and we are it’s cultivators.

This is why *this* text is read at the beginning of Advent. We start at the END of the story, so

⁶ Marsh, *ibid*.

⁷ Marsh, *ibid*.

we can truly appreciate and understand the BEGINNING. Because it is when we are suffering, that God *is with us* in the nearest of ways. God being with us as a baby in a manger might bring us joy or happy thoughts, but it's Jesus heading to the cross, that truly helps me feel seen in my suffering. The adult Jesus who knows suffering and was persecuted and lost loved ones and was betrayed by friends and who wasn't welcomed in his hometown and wasn't heard or respected or understood, the Jesus who knows what it's like to be on his knees praying in a garden, "God take this cup from me." Jesus even shows us what it's like to die—and *still have God near*—Emmanuel, *God with us*.

Jesus never stops drawing people near to him, even in his suffering. Jesus never stops speaking and teaching about the kin-dom of God and the ways of Love, even in his own suffering, saying even from the cross, "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.*"

Yes, Advent leads to a celebration of Jesus' birth, but it also must lead us to the culmination of his ministry, which is for the kin-dom of God

to come on earth as it is in heaven. For the ways of this earth to pass away, so that God's ways can be born anew.

In his poem, "Tired," Langston Hughes writes,

"I am so tired of waiting,
Aren't you,
For the world to become good
And beautiful and kind?
Let us take a knife
And cut the world in two –
And see what worms are eating
At the rind."

Sometimes the "signs of the season" aren't pretty, but if we can't truly see them for what they are, we'll keep telling a story of our past, instead of writing (W-R-I-T-I-N-G) and righting (R-I-G-H-T-I-N-G) the story of our future, of God not just "with us," but "within us"—transforming us from the inside out into people who don't just count down to Christmas, but who make each day count for Christ...people who tell the Story of God's love through the signs of the season, even through the suffering seasons of our lives...

Amen.