

Sunday, November 13, 2016
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:1-19

Lois Harder

Signs of the times

What a week! I considered a variety of scripture passages – what shall I preach? What do people need and long to hear? I decided to go with the lectionary texts, confident that The Spirit would provide insights as to how they're relevant and helpful, hopeful.

We have the words of two prophets – Isaiah and Jesus. Both of them were talking about signs of the times – the current times in which they lived as well as God's time, the times that are yet to come. Turns out these signs of the times are universal, as relevant now as they were then.

The people in Jesus' time were distracted* by the opulence and beautiful bling of the temple. So distracted that they could not focus on the beauty of the widow who had just demonstrated how to give deeply out of poverty*.

Jesus was talking about destruction*. He was using a style of storytelling called “apocalyptic” to teach his disciples that *when* bad things happen – and they will – we don't have to be terrified*. *When* false prophets* appear – and they will – creating chaos*, division* and conflict*, do NOT follow them and don't allow them to render you hopeless* or powerless*. *When* we hear about wars* and insurrections* - and we have – we don't have to be afraid* or disoriented*. At least, not for long.

Apocalyptic storytelling includes details like earthquakes*, famines* and plagues*. In other words, Jesus is talking about experiencing suffering*, uncertainty*, threat*. He's warning that there will be persecution*, arrests*, betrayal* and loss*. The signs of these times will include hatred* and danger* and sometimes even death* for those who are faithful* to the ways of Jesus.

Jesus goes on to explain that all of these signs and this suffering will offer opportunity*. It will be a chance to testify*, Jesus says. But this testimony doesn't need to be “rehearsed or planned”. In difficult times, we must stay focused on Jesus* and the things he taught us. And when we do that, we will be given words*. We will be given wisdom*. We will be given confidence and assurance*.

Now, this is not the kind of “testimony” that we typically think of, in which we're praising God for good times and good things (although, we need to keep doing that too). We often think of testimony as the way we tell the stories of declaration – how God brought the faithful out of slavery into freedom, how God made a way when there was no way, how God acted to save a distressed people. But *this* is testimony when we're in the midst of divided and painful times!

Giving testimony during times of destruction and division is hard. It requires, in part, the audacity* to muster courage and hope* in the face of fear. It means finding the boldness to speak* on our own behalf and on behalf of others. This week I read, “Great suffering changes some people and defeats others, but for those who endure - their very souls are gained.”

Howard Thurman, brilliant African American theologian, writes this about people who have suffered and endured. “Into their faces come a subtle radiance and a settled serenity; into their relationships a vital generosity that opens the sealed doors of the heart in all who are encountered along the way.”

Now let me be clear. I am not suggesting for a moment, nor was Howard Thurman, that we should seek out or welcome suffering in order to gain our souls. We should always, always try to alleviate and end suffering! What I understand Jesus to be saying, using this apocalyptic language is that these “signs of the times” are nothing new. Jesus himself had the prophets before him, proclaiming and reminding people that God has been faithful through difficult times... since the dawn of time! And God will continue to be faithful through these current difficult times.

What I ALSO understand Jesus to be saying is that God is longing for the cooperation and collaboration of humanity to read *God’s* signs and help transform* the world! Jesus’ entire life gives us a whole different lens through which to see God’s signs. His radical inclusivity*, his model of claiming power through nonviolent action*, his ministry of presence* are all signs that we can and MUST pay closer attention to.

We see how Jesus knew and acted on God’s signs of transformation from the book of Isaiah: The text talked about radical transformation of living conditions in the new Jerusalem, like low infant mortality*, housing and food* for all citizens, and sustainable employment*. These are the kinds of signs that Jesus’ followers must focus on in these current times.

“We may not know *how* God means to transform the universe, but we can confess” – testify! – that we know it is God’s intention to do so. “What (is) possible for the single believer, the single congregation, is to do the work involved in such transformation by following the patterns of mercy that Jesus has laid out for us. We are able to give one drink of cold water* at a time. We are able to bring comfort to the poor, one act of mercy* at a time. One possession shared*. One friendship claimed*. One covenant of love*. One meal offered*. One moment of kindness* and commendation. One confession of God’s presence*. One instance in which a person is humanized* rather than objectified. One challenge* to the broken system that maintains injustice. One declaration* of the evil that is hiding in plain sight. One statement that every person is a child of God*. One cry that God is love and love wins!

THESE acts and confessions create the signs of God’s time! Let us cling to the certainty that our lives are in God’s hands. Let us claim that WE are followers of Jesus! Not perfect, but willing. Committed. Ready. Amen.

*indicates a poster board sign held up with that word or phrase on it.

Resources cited:

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, pages 290-295 and 308-313.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3059