

Grace and peace to you from our heavenly Father and from the one who came to show us the Way, Jesus Christ Our Lord, amen.

Where would we be without signs? You probably don't think about them that much, but you use them every day. They tell which streets are one-way, how fast you are allowed to drive, where to find a restroom (and which one is for your gender when you get there), when your favorite store is open, where to buy a meal, what dangerous areas to avoid, where to find a sale, and a zillion other things that are part of daily life. Without signs, we'd be confused, unsure where we were, have no idea where to find our daily necessities and, a good bit of the time, actually lost. I drove Niki and Stephen to Cincinnati Children's Hospital this week for Stephen's appointment. What a huge Hospital. I'm not sure if it's the largest one I've ever been in, but if not, it's close... The thing is, they've done a really great job of using signs to help you get to where you need to be. Every few feet there's another set of directional signs assuring you that you're still on the right path. I've been to OSU and Miami Valley hospitals and both of them could use a little sign education from Cincinnati Children's.

What happens when signs give a mixed message or simply make no sense? That's the case more often than you might think. As I thought about the Gospel this week, I began to wonder how obvious are the signs Jesus assured the disciples would happen. How easy it is for us to confuse everyday normal disfunction and

disaster from the signs of Jesus' second coming. We begin this new Church year, as we do every year in the season of Advent thinking about the time when Jesus is coming. We church people say there's really 3 different Advents. We're giving God praise for the first Advent when Jesus became flesh and was born some 2000 years ago, but we also thank God for His coming into our hearts anew each year as we celebrate that birth. The third Advent is the one we still look for in the future when Jesus will return riding on the clouds and when all the world will see him and bend the knee. How sure are we about that third Advent? What if we're confused about the signs? After all signs aren't always as clear and straight forward as the one's we followed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. I Googled Mixed Signal Signs and Funny signs and depending on how I worded the google search I got between 45 and 285 million hits. Here's a few of my favorite ones... (Show slides.)

Sometimes signs can be confusing and send mixed signals. Our gospel reading has Jesus talking to his disciples about signs that will precede the return of the Son of Man to earth. He speaks of cosmic changes, signs in the sun, moon and stars, as well as distress among the nations and deep foreboding in the hearts of individuals. But some of us might want to say, "Well, that's fine that you can describe the signs and their meaning, Jesus, but I'm not having that kind certainty when I look at the world. It seems to me we've got all kinds of cosmic changes,

hurricanes hitting our coasts every year, wildfires destroying whole towns and certainly there is no shortage of distress among nations today. Just this week we saw Russia commit an act of war against the Ukraine. Many of us are often filled with foreboding after listening to the evening news.” Here’s our problem, in one form or another, this sort of stuff has been going on for centuries, so what do those signs mean, if anything, other than life isn’t easy? Is Jesus about to come back or is what we are witnessing just the way things are in a broken and sinful world where good and evil battle it out?

What’s more, even the Gospel itself sends mixed signals. Jesus’ comment about signs is part of a conversation with his followers that began when some of them commented on the magnificent stones used in the building of the temple and Jesus responded by saying the day would come when not one stone would be left standing. Then we get to the passage we read today, and all at once Jesus is talking about these disturbing signs as signals that he is about to return to earth. You can imagine his hearers’ sudden confusion. “Say what? I thought we were talking about the end of the temple and the city and now you’re speaking of the end of the world?” And, of course, we know that did not happen in A.D. 70.

Finally, as if to cement the confusion, Jesus says to his hearers, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.” Okaaay. But which things? Well, the temple and city, but not the second coming, yet isn’t

that what Jesus was saying? Now it's certainly possible Luke actually mashed a couple of different topics Jesus discussed together, but if that's the case, then Luke was having the same kind of trouble we have in distinguishing a crisis near at hand from another one yet to come — trouble making sense of the signs. When the signs of the times give us mixed signals, we tend to ask questions like, “Are these the final days” or “How can things get worse than they are now?”

So, in attempting to understand and interpret the events of our day, one hazard is we'll miss the signs altogether, but a greater danger is that we'll misread them. We can watch reports of great trouble in the news and look at the difficulties in our own lives and view them as signs that despair is warranted. It'd be a shame to do that because despair can cause us to miss the most important thing Jesus said in this whole passage. Remember, he was talking to those who were following him, and to them he said, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” In other words, Jesus says to read the world's troubles only as omens of doom is to misread them. Instead, and against all conventional logic, we should see them as signs of our redemption, advance notices of God's Kingdom. By the way, we already are full citizens of that wonderful Kingdom.

If doom and gloom precede redemption and salvation, then the world's tribulations and our personal trials can be understood as reasons for us to remain

faithful, hopeful and optimistic in the long view. Our redemption is near and the long view is what is called for. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a famous 20th century pastor probably best known to us for writing the hymn *God of Grace and God of Glory*, writes of having a conversation with the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Reinhold Niebuhr is also a famous theologian, but you might be aware of him because of a prayer he authored. It's called the Serenity Prayer and is recited at most, if not all Alcohol Anonymous meetings. Niebuhr was so convinced of the universal tendency for humans to abuse power. He was pessimistic about the possibility of society becoming ethical. Still, he was not without ultimate hope in God and believed individual acts could be conducted on a higher moral level than that of the society in which the individual lived. Fosdick, however, had more confidence in humankind's ability to progress, and thus, he urged Niebuhr to be more optimistic. Niebuhr responded, "If you will be pessimistic with me decade by decade, I will be optimistic with you aeon by aeon."

That's a hard position to take when we are in the midst of conflict, troubles and threats. It calls for us to see the good news behind or in spite of the bad news. Of course, Good News is what the gospel of Jesus means. As Niebuhr put it elsewhere: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by

faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.”

As for me, I think I’m going to take Niebuhr’s advice and at least try to keep the long view in mind as we hear of earthquakes, wars and other signs of calamity. If we believe Jesus, we shouldn’t view Advent as merely a preparation season for Christmas. It’s a time to remind ourselves not to misread the apocalyptic signs in our world as reasons to despair. Rather they’re signals to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near. I won’t ignore the mixed signals of our time, but instead look forward with hope for God is still in charge and has control over you, me, and the whole world.

May we never become a people living in despair! This first week of Advent may God strengthen our faith and through his love give us hope, to trust Jesus enough to stand up and raise our heads, to reject despair, even in the darkest of times because we know for sure our redemption is at hand! Amen.