

What's a sign for you that Christmas is near? For some of us it's seeing pumpkin spice lattes transform to peppermint mochas. For others it's the snow falling from the sky. Christmas decorations and gift ideas from retailers can help some— even if they've been out since September. Holiday music, the empty feeling of a dead loved one, or the dark days and long nights – what is your sign?

Today in Luke we hear Jesus speak of signs. We hear about the sun, the moon, the stars, and the distressed nation's confusion by the roaring of the sea and the waves, along with people's fear and foreboding. These are the signs in Luke. It's easy for us to relate to these signs. The climatological focus of the beginning of the reading today draws my mind to global warming and the United Nation's Climate Conference in Paris tomorrow.¹ Recently, researchers have noted that we've reached the halfway mark on the two-degree-Celsius temperature increase that marks the climate's tipping point.² 2014 was the warmest year on record, and 2015 is on track to be even warmer. Sea levels have risen causing low-lying nations to actively look for ways to move people to higher ground.³ The fear is palpable, and so we might ask "will this be the end?" The theologian Sallie McFague shifts this question and asks, "what if 'what's coming' has already come?" After all, the signs are among us.

What is unique about today's reading is that Luke shifts our question much like Sallie does. Luke takes us from the question, "when will we see these signs happen?" and shifts it to "how shall we live as a result of these signs?" As one scholar notes, shifting the question from "when" to "how" invites us to perceive what is arguably the most stunning part of this passage, namely when Jesus says "now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near." Or in a more

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/marshallshepherd/2015/11/25/so-what-is-this-paris-climate-meeting-anyway-the-basics-of-cop21/>

² <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/11/9/world-halfway-to-2-degrees-c-warming-limit.html>

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-11/prophet-s-candle>

literal translation of the Greek we hear the text saying “and these things beginning to happen bend yourselves back...your redemption [is near].”⁴

And if we’re bending ourselves back and lifting up our heads, then our heads and bodies must initially be curved in upon ourselves. That curvature is an inward sign of what it means to be human and to be entombed in sin. When I met with Mitchell’s parents before baptism we talked about sin. We talked about Luther’s view of sin as “being curved inward” in that sense that sin is when all God’s good gifts are turned in upon ourselves and forgotten. It’s the self-centered, fearfulness that marks our sinful existence. Yet here in Luke, in the midst of the tragedy of the world, in the midst of the signs of the cosmos we’re reminded to stand up. We’re reminded that we catch glimpses of God’s presence here in this world, and at the same time we know that God’s love, mercy, and grace are not completely realized. We live in a place of hope. And if we’re living in a place of hope what do we do? What does it look like to stand up? Well, this week we can look for an answer to that question in the most unlikely of places – a commercial – an insurance commercial from 2013 nonetheless. Take a minute to sit back and listen. (Play: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kI1bKm22Up0>)

There is a glimpse of hope in this commercial. As the child says “in the midst of all the bad things that can happen in life, they can’t stop us from making our lives good.” That message of defiant hope is powerful. Yes, bad things will happen. Oh gosh, they’ll happen. Yet, perhaps there is a greater chance of good if we don’t let the threat of bad deter us from living life and seeking and creating good. After all, as Christians hope is a central part of our faith. Hope does things. Hope does things not because we have to, but rather because we’ve been given so many good gifts. Hope responds to love. Hope creates faith in a better future, and therefore leads one to act, to actually do something, to bring about a better future.

⁴ Following “Youngs Literal Translation (1862)” of the bible

This all reminded me of a quote often attributed to Martin Luther, or maybe St. Francis, that says “if the world were going to end tomorrow, I would plant a tree today.” What a beautiful reminder that we stand up and look towards the power of hope. It’s God’s promise that even in the most difficult of circumstances our God brings all things to a good end and invites us to live today.

Because my English teacher didn’t often give me A’s, I find it personally helpful to clarify that optimism and hope are two different things. Optimism assumes things will get better; while hope testifies that whether things get better or worse, God’s goodwill for us and all of creation will ultimately prevail.⁵ You might ask, “What does that mean for us?” Great question, thanks for asking. To look at climate change with optimism would be to say that it *will* get *better* - that leaders will walk away from Paris and have a desire, plan, and ability to make changes to avoid the potential catastrophe. However, hope though, hope says no matter what happens, no matter if we hit that 2-degree-Celcius mark or not, God’s promise is that God will not leave us and that God’s goodwill shall prevail. And then no matter what happens we are set free to act and respond – we will continue to do our best to bring about a better future.

Today we gather at the beginning of the season of Advent with hopeful postures. It’s this season of Advent where we draw our communal and liturgical hope that can be a source of our personal and daily hope. Christian hope is bold and perhaps even defiant because it is based on freedom. A beautiful example of this freedom and hope came in 2013 when our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, along with the Episcopal Church and the Church of Sweden together made a joint statement to the United States politicians on climate issues. The statement said, “As Christians, we do not live in the despair and melancholy of the tomb, but in the light of the Risen Christ. Our resurrection hope is grounded in the promise of renewal and restoration for all of God’s creation, which gives us energy,

⁵ <http://www.davidlose.net/2013/10/on-hope/>

strength and perseverance in the face of overwhelming challenge. For us, this promise is more than an abstraction. It is a challenge to commit ourselves to walk a different course and serve as the hands of God in working to heal the brokenness of our hurting world.”⁶ As such, I think that we trust in God and we are free to throw ourselves into taking care of the little corner of the world in which we find ourselves. In that corner of the world we can be conscious of our impact on the environment, we can look for sustainable fuel sources, and perhaps we, like Luther, can plant a tree.

In these darker days of winter, it might be hard for us to imagine planting a tree. And so today to emphasize the ways we become co-creators with God and the ways that we live in hope, we’re going to cover our white, bare tree (perhaps a birch tree) in the back with our responses to hope. In your bulletin you’ll find a green leaf. I invite you to take a few moments to think about ways that you can respond to hope. Knowing that either way our God is always with us, how are you set free to live in the hope that our God is with us. Take a few minutes now. (Congregants are given a few moments to think and write.) During the hymn following this sermon, during communion, or after church I invite you to stick your leaf on the large tree in the back. We’ve got a table of tape setup for you to easily stick it on the branches wherever you’d like.

I’ve said all of that today to remind you of this: stand up, friends. Let us look with defiant hope to our God whose presence is with us and whose continuously creative spirit reigns. Today we are reminded that we are a hopeful people in the midst of the signs that seem to indicate the world is falling apart. Luke’s gospel reminds us that we are empowered to respond to the signs. We are empowered to stand up and be active participants in healing this broken world. Here we stand up, for our redemption is drawing near. Here we know what the world has the potential to become. And here we stand up to be co-participants in God’s redemption and to be reflections of God’s eternal spirit. My friends, stand up for your redemption is near. Amen.

⁶<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=1145311>, page 76.