

Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign (Advent 1)  
a sermon on Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill  
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*Sign, sign, everywhere a sign.  
Blockin' up the scenery, breakin' my mind  
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the signs?*

Maybe you've heard the song *Signs* by Five Man Electric Band before, but my guess is you haven't heard it, at least until now, in a sermon. So why would a 1970 anti-authoritarian hit by a Canadian rock band make the leap from billboard chart to the first Sunday in Advent worship service at The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill? Here's why: Today's Bible stories are about signs—signs that point the way we are to go, signs that warn and caution, signs that illustrate a reality bigger than themselves.

You see, it's Advent. As the days darken in the northern hemisphere, (and as we gather this morning for worship in a sanctuary without electrical power!) we do what we can to increase the light. We drape lights on our Christmas trees, our shrubbery, our windowsills. We hunker down against the colder temperatures, cozy up to the fireplace, sip warmth from a teacup, read a good book. We settle in for the holiday the advertisers are all trying to sell us—one with perfect gifts, perfect families, perfectly perfect warm and fuzzy slippers and perfectly perfect warm and fuzzy feelings.

But today's texts from the Bible are anything but warm and fuzzy. Jeremiah 33 and Luke 21 do not lend themselves to putting us in the Christmas spirit, whatever that is. We are yet a far piece off from shepherds keeping watch in the fields by night or angels singing "Glory to God in the highest!" Today's texts are foreboding and apocalyptic; they are disturbing, disheartening, and disorienting. Today's Bible stories are stories about *signs*.

*And the sign said anybody caught trespassin' would be shot on sight  
So I jumped on the fence and-a yelled at the house  
"Hey! What gives you the right?"  
"To put up a fence to keep me out or to keep mother nature in"  
"If God was here he'd tell you to your face, man, you're some kinda sinner"*

As one candle on the advent wreath flickers to light the way for the Christ child, Jeremiah tells the story of Israel's Migrant Caravan. Their home in Jerusalem, the one place they thought was protected by God's covenant with them, had been utterly destroyed by their enemies, the temple—God's house, their place of worship—not only without light or heat, but desecrated. The people of Israel figured God had abandoned them, what with the temple and their home in utter ruins. So they did what most of us would do if we were to find ourselves in their shoes: They left the only home they had ever known for a foreign land, because even slavery to their captors was preferable to watching their children die in a war zone.

In the midst of this horrific scene, the prophet Jeremiah has a sign of hope for a people who consider themselves abandoned, forgotten by God. Just a few chapters before today's excerpt from the book of Jeremiah, the people hear that God has not abandoned them after all. This is the context of a verse many of you once memorized: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future with hope'" (Jeremiah 29:11). Taken on its own, this is a warm and fuzzy promise we embroider on the laundry bags of students as we send them off to college. Or maybe it is a warm and fuzzy reassurance we say as we send a loved one off to surgery. But warm and fuzzy is not what this verse is after. It is meant to be a sign that all evidence to the contrary, God has a plan. This hell that the people of Israel are experiencing is the context, then, for God's instruction through the

prophet Jeremiah to “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:5-7). God essentially instructs the exiles to become productive citizens of Babylon, the nation with all the power, at least for the time being. Finally we get to chapter 33—our text for today—and in this chapter comes the sign. If you read carefully, you will note that the sign of God’s restoration of the people of Israel is *righteousness*. The sign of God’s healing and Israel’s homecoming is *justice*. Acts of *justice* and *righteousness* are the signs that God is at work.

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This is essentially the question Jesus asks in Luke after he cautions his followers to be ready for his second coming. “Look at the fig tree and all the trees,” Jesus says, “as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:29-31). What things, you might ask? Signs. “Signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves” (Luke 21:25). All of creation will be out of order. It’s disturbing, disheartening, disorienting. Not at all like the warmth of a candlelight Christmas Eve.

It’s Advent. These aren’t warm and fuzzy texts. But neither is this a warm and fuzzy world. It is a world in which children and infants are tear gassed and shot with rubber bullets, all because they are being used as pawns in a political game rather than loved for the image of God in which they are made. It is a world in which appeals to the fears we have about people who look different than we do—and about whether there will be enough for all of us to survive and thrive—win out over appeals for compassion.

*Now, hey you, mister, can't you read?  
You've got to have a shirt and tie to get a seat  
You can't even watch, no you can't eat  
You ain't supposed to be here  
The sign said you got to have a membership card to get inside*

It’s not a warm and fuzzy world, but it is the world our God enters and transforms. It is the world into which a baby was born in a manger, a world which beckons his coming still. Until then, we might do well to remember what our God did when he walked a not so warm and fuzzy planet.

When the Jesus on whom we wait this Advent met hungry people, as he will meet us at the Lord’s Table in a few moments, he fed them. When the Jesus upon whom we wait this Advent met sick people, as we pray he will meet those among us who are sick in mind, body, and spirit, he healed them. When the Jesus on whom we wait this Advent met people who had been excluded, like the Gerasene demoniac, or the woman at the well, or the blind beggar, or the lepers, or the woman with a flow of blood, or the woman who was stooped over, or the deaf man, or the children who’d been kept away from him, or let’s just imagine, the migrant caravan fleeing their war-torn homes, he restored them to health and to life in the community.

May we be the body of Christ—the bread of heaven, the cup of salvation, the light in the darkness—outward signs of God’s love and grace this Advent. Come, Lord Jesus.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.