

## Only the Sign of Jonah

Advent 1 (Luke 21:25-36)

Happy New Year! This is the beginning of the Christian year. As we do at the beginning of the secular year, we say: What was it all about? Where is it all going? We take stock. Look back. Make resolutions. Look to the future.

#1. You have heard perhaps of the famous novel, *From Here to Eternity*, by American James Jones. That's what we're doing today, asking: What is from here to eternity? We are also looking from eternity to eternity to see where it's all going and what it's about.

The gospel text is all about looking for the signs of what is coming. We know how to read the sky, as the ancient rhyme goes: "Red sky at night, sailors delight; red sky at morning, sailors take warning." A version of this is found in Matthew 16:2-3. The Pharisees come to Jesus asking for a sign and he responds: "When it is evening, you say it will be fair weather; for the sky is red." And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.'

Managing life involves reading signs – road signs, stop signs, yield right of way, deer crossing etc. Exit and entrance signs. In fact, a major pizza chain even has stamped a sign on pizza boxes: "Open before eating." Who is that clueless!

We know to open the pizza box before eating the pizza, but how good are we at reading other signs?

In Amos 3:4, 8, the prophet asks: "Does the lion roar and you're not afraid?" You better be or you'll be lunch.

Language itself is made up of signs that point beyond themselves. For example, if I say: "Outside of our church is a parking lot," you can picture the parking lot in your mind.

#2. In contrast to signs all around, there is Mark 13:32: "No one knows the time of the end, not even the angels, not even the Son, but only the Father."

Luke 21:34 says that the end comes like a snare. Snares aren't used any more because they are considered cruel. It used to be that people snared rabbits. They even snared big game, even human beings. What is the whole point about a snare? You don't see the snare, and then you're snared. Amos 3:5 asks: "Does a bird fall in a snare when there is no trap for it?" There is the one who sets the snare. Watch out! In Matthew 15:1-13 is the parable of the wise and foolish maidens. The wise maidens had their oil lamps filled when the bridegroom came; the foolish maidens were unprepared.

In addition, there are five places in the New Testament where it is said that the end will come like a thief in the night:

- Matt 24:43: “. . . if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and not have let his house be broken into.”
- 1 Thess 5:2: “. . . the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”
- 2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.”
- Rev. 3:3: “If you will not awake, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.”
- Rev. 16:15: “Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake!”

The thief catches you unaware. No matter how many burglar alarms you have, the burglars have figured out a way to catch you when you're not expecting them. That's what this text is about: Be ready. We do not know. And the only thing to do is be ready, look at the signs.

There are several ways we try to avoid or deal with this snare. First, we fall into trying to figure God out. Rebecca Goldstein, in her book, *Thirty-six Proofs for the Existence of God*, show how alleged proofs for God fail. It's a lot of fun to read. It's like being back in first year college taking Philosophy 101. It's absolutely right. There are no proofs for God that work. Of course the opposite is also true. There are no proofs that God doesn't exist! But most of the time we get caught in the snare of thinking there must be a way to prove God exists.

Second, on many college campuses today groups of student atheists have sprung up. There have been Christian groups and Jewish groups forever. Not that there is an increase of atheists, but now atheists feel free to organize and speak up. Dawkins and others have given them courage. Their theme is: We can't tolerate the intolerance of those Christians!

Third, we retreat into our own lives, into what we can manage. The astronomers tell us that the universe is somewhere between 92 and 93 trillion light years across. You and I are not even the blink of an eye.

If you go to the ocean and look at all the grains of sand. How could you even guess at the number – quintillions? You and I are like another grain of sand.

Or the water. 6/7's of the world is covered by ocean. Think of the number of drops of water! And you and I, humanly speaking, are like one of those drops of water.

The blink of an eye. Another grain of sand. A drop of water. We seem small and insignificant in the larger scheme of the cosmos and so retreat into our own lives.

#3. What does the Christian message say? Christianity has one sign: the anti-sign, the sign of the cross.

In Matthew 16 the Pharisees come to Jesus to test him, asking for a sign. It is the same as what happens in John 6:30 after the feeding of the five thousand, only this time it is, not the Pharisees but his disciples ask who ask: Do another miracle, show us another sign.

In Matt 16:4 comes the answer to all those who seek signs: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah." (Also Luke 11:29) It's even harsher in Mark 8:12: "No sign will be given." In Matthew the only sign, the sign of Jonah, is the sign of the cross, which is the opposite of what you and I would think of for a sign.

In 1 Cor 1:22 Paul takes on the miracle-seeking problem, or the sign-seeking problem. In the original language "miracle" and "sign" are really the same word: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. . . "

A generation ago most Christian churches had a steeple on top, and on top of the steeple Catholic churches had a cross and Protestant churches had a weather vane. Today steeples are less common but the cross is the universal sign of Christianity. It is found in jewelry, on bumper stickers, logos, and the like. While it can become frivolous, the cross is the anti-sign of Christianity.

It is easy in the troubles and distractions of our lives to lose sight of the enormity of what God has done in the cross and resurrection. The cross is the anti-sign of that enormity. The One who creates out of nothing has become his own creature, who was born, lived, died, rose again, and remains with us. As Eph 3:20 states: What he has done, is doing, and will do is "exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think." (KJV)

This means that we don't say: Jesus is God or Jesus equals God because that is to subordinate him to the larger concept of godness. Rather, we say: God is Jesus. We say that whatever is said about God outside of Jesus is of the devil (Smalcald III/8/10; *Book of Concord*, Tappert 313; Kolb/Wengert 323).

Everything we say about God is summed up and measured by Jesus Christ. The Lord of all, who created it all, who is bigger than all of time and space, was born about 4 BC and lived until about 30 AD. He came to be truly be one of us; he died and rose again. He has come to our lives and changed everything, so much so that every sparrow that falls and every blade of grass is under his care.

Therefore on this New Year's Day, as we look back and as we look forward, we're looking through Christmas to Good Friday and Easter. And on that basis to Pentecost. This is the Good News. The Lord has come, is coming, and will come. He is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Amen