Many signs, only one you can count on

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

A Sermon for the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

The end is near. It's coming soon.

How do you know when? Not the end for you and me personally, but the end of the world, the end of history.

Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, is a huge school with over 2,000 students and over 100 faculty. The school teaches justification by faith, inerrancy, and that the end times will be like Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4: Jesus will meet believers in the sky.

They teach that after that there will be a period of tribulation and then the second coming of Christ. For pastors trained in this tradition, the Bible gives us a way of knowing, a way of figuring out the end times. They teach that if you understand the scriptures rightly, you can be "in the know" about the end.

People generally love "signs" and looking for signs in scripture, in the stars, in ordinary experiences, and in extra-ordinary events. They look high and how for a sign, for evidence, that extra something more, more than living by faith alone.

But the problem with those kinds of signs is that they are at best, ambiguous. They could mean this, or they could mean that. They even could intentionally misleading, a devil in disguise.

Paul warns us in 2 Cor 11:14: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." So, watch out. Even visions of light can be false signs, false evidence, the devil in disguise.

When, where, and how will the end times happen? We don't know. It's not for us to know. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:2: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." There will be peace and security, then destruction.

Mark 13:32 is worth memorizing: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor even the Son, but only the Father."

These texts are right there for everyone to see. And there are more like them. In fact, in five places in the New Testament, it says the end comes like a thief in the night.

Yet many ignore these texts in their hope of getting a little inside information by reading the signs of the times.

This is not a new phenomenon. It's happened almost from the beginning. Already in the year 140 A. D. there was a man named Montanus who thought he had figured things out. He said: "God the Father was in the Old Testament, God the Son was in the New, and I am the Holy Spirit. Listen to me." People didn't know what to do about him and his claims, but that controversy was one the important things that pushed the church into

putting the Bible together, into separating the trustworthy books and letters from those which are untrustworthy.

Then about a thousand years later, a man named Joachim of Fiora (1200 A.D.), calculated that the end-times were coming soon. That was a time of great unrest and upheaval. This went on until the 1500's, the time of Luther, who also understood that the end was coming in his lifetime.

Then in the 1700's in Germany, a Lutheran Greek scholar of some note, named Johann Bengel, thought the end times could be calculated by examining that dates and time periods from Genesis to Revelation. His calculations of the end times spread from Germany to England and the United States.

In England in 1830 a pastor named John Darby claimed to have received a special illumination from God about the end-times: There would be a "Rapture" in which Christ would snatch up believers. This was an idea that no one in church history prior to the 1800's had ever thought of or imagined. But this idea, once begun, has continued to have a strong grip on evangelical Christianity. It has led to Christians using numbers in the Bible to make complex and detailed charts to graph out the sequence of events in "God's plan."

In this country in the early 1800's, a preacher, William Miller, prophesied that the end of the world was coming in 1844. When the time came, his followers, over 100,000 people, sold their property, put on white robes, and went to the tops of hills and mountains, but the end didn't happen. It turned out to be what they called "the Great Disappointment," and they became what we know as the Seventh Day Adventists.

End times preachers often appeal to Paul in 1 Thessalonians, especially to last week's text, I Thessalonians 4:17, where he writes about "we who are alive who are left shall be caught up . . . in the clouds." [Also, to Matthew 24:40-41: "Two men will be in the field; one is taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left," and Luke 17:34-35: "That night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together; one will be taken and the other left."]

Some end times preachers are "date setters;" others are "date teasers." The Jehovah's Witnesses predicted the end would come in 1917. They were "date setters." When it didn't come, they said it came spiritually, but not in physical form.

[Tim LaHaye, author of *The Left Behind* series, is a "date teaser." He doesn't lock into a specific date.]

The problem is the Bible isn't a book of future predictions like that.

Rather, prophecy in the Bible is about three things: Retelling, forthtelling, and foretelling.

Retelling. First, the big event in the Old Testament is the Exodus. That's where it all began. The Lord took the people out of slavery, gave them a land, and promised them a

future. The ancient Hebrews said: “Because God rescued us from slavery, he is Lord and therefore he was from the beginning.” Therefore, Genesis. He who rescued us was there from the beginning. “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3).

Forthtelling. And therefore, the Lord is consistent with himself now. Most of what we call “prophecy” in the Old Testament is what we today call “preaching.” This is who God is, and this is how he acts. He acts with judgment and to give us a hope.

Foretelling. Then there is a small portion of prophecy which is foretelling, looking toward the future. But it is not in the way of saying we can calculate the time and the season and the place, but rather, God gave us an Exodus, and he will give us an Exodus again. God gave us a covenant, and he will give us a new covenant. God gave us a kingdom, and he will give us a new kingdom. God gave us a king, and he will give us a new king. God gave us the city of Jerusalem, and he will give us a new Jerusalem. God is the one who is the Lord and he continues to be the same way.

We can see this in certain examples. The Book of Jeremiah says all will be restored in seventy years. We know that the restoration was in 538 B.C., and we can calculate the Exile at 597 B.C. or 587 B.C. No matter what kind of mathematics you do, it doesn’t come out to seventy years, because what the prophet was really saying is that it is about the lifetime of a man. Seventy years is three score and ten. [This is not claiming special, inside knowledge of a divine timetable.]

Or consider Isaiah 7:14: “A young woman shall bear a son and you shall call his name Immanuel.” That is, first of all, for the people back then in Isaiah’s time, and so it happened. But then in God’s good purposes, it happened also much later in a similar way in Bethlehem. But we do not say that Isaiah is giving us the times and the season.

As we have said, people get caught in calculating and looking for signs because they want inside information. Evidence to assure them that they are in the elect.

It’s not a question of what God *could* do. God could have created the world in one second with all the geological strata and all the books in all the libraries and all whatever is, just like that. But rather, the Lord has chosen to take creation seriously and history seriously and do it his way. So, too, God takes our lives and our future seriously and becomes involved in our lives. That’s who God is, not what God *could* do, but what he has done in Jesus Christ.

There is that temptation, which is a temptation of the evil one, to say: “Well, Lord, I know I should believe you, but please give me a sign. Give me an extra something, a feeling, a private miracle, so that I know you are Lord.”

Matthew 16:1-4 warns us about this. The pharisees come to Jesus and say: “Give us a sign.” Jesus says to them: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah.”

The sign of Jonah? That is the cross. Jonah was the one who was swallowed by the whale, died, and then tossed up alive on the beach. It was a way of describing what the Lord was doing on the cross.

Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:22-24: “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

The cross, the one sign you can count on.

Our hope is not in calculations, feelings, dreams, or good works. Our hope is in him.

As to the times and seasons we don’t know, but we know that we belong to him. That’s what matters. As Paul writes: We are sons and daughters of the light, of the day (I Thessalonians 5:5). We have been destined, predestined; chosen. It doesn’t depend on us. It depends on him. It’s not about whether we’re good enough or think rightly, believe rightly. It’s because of him and we are his, baptized into his death, forgiven and redeemed, to be raised with him.

Paul writes: “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him” (I Thessalonians 5:9). And, as Paul closes his letter to the Thessalonians: “He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it” (5:24).

This is a sure hope. Amen