

## “Reading the Signs”

Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:24-37

On November 18<sup>th</sup>, the sun set in Barrow, Alaska. There’s something special about this particular sunset. When the sun went down that day, it was the beginning of what’s called “polar night.” In places so far north and so far south on the globe, the sun will set and it just won’t come back up. In Barrow, they won’t really see the sun again for 66 days.<sup>i</sup>

I know some of you, like my husband, have experienced these days of night only or day only. For the rest of us, though, it’s hard to imagine, right? How much of our lives are structured by the simple, dependable signs of every day? There’s even an old story told about Adam and Eve. (It’s not from the Bible.) The legend says that when the sun set for the first time, they didn’t know it would ever rise again. They were afraid – they thought the darkness was their fault. Would it become chaos? Was the world over? Had they done something to displease God? But, eventually, the sun came up again. It sets and rises and sets and rises. They learned that this is just what nature is like. There are things they do not and cannot control.<sup>ii</sup>

Our scripture readings this morning focus on God’s miraculous power intervening in creation. They also look at signs in God’s creation that we can learn from. In Isaiah, we see God’s wondrous deeds showing the same dramatic transformation as kindling catching fire or water suddenly boiling. God come to earth is like earthquakes and cracking thunderstorms. Compared to God’s might, we find that we are no more than leaves– our sinfulness like a breeze carrying us far from where we’re meant to be. We hope for God’s action, but we wonder about our own waywardness. Are we being punished or is this the way the world is? Do we call out for God, our Father, or do we turn away? Are we happy to be molded by the holy potter or are we insistent on remaining formless blobs with little purpose or direction?

In the Gospel, we hear Jesus preparing us for the day of judgment, for the return of the Messiah. Again, even the heavens are quaking with God's presence. And there is Jesus with angels and saints for all to see. The suffering, the impossible signs— they are somehow part of the new heaven and the new earth unfolding before us. We don't control it. We can't start it or stop it. We can't hurry it along or tailor it to our preferences. We are the clay, not the potter.

Jesus reminds us to learn from creation – to learn from what we see all around us. The fig tree gives us so many signs of what's coming next: a tender branch, new leaves. If we are so sure that summer is coming, why aren't we looking for Jesus to come again?

Jesus says we should read the signs, but he also says, “about that day or hour no one knows.” In this paradox we find that we are called to be mindful of what is growing and changing around us, but we are also called to be humble – to enter into the holy mystery beyond our knowing. Can we be watchful without the zeal of certainty? Put another way – can we trust God to elevate all creation when it is time without our two cents for good measure?

Adam and Eve were probably properly scared that first sunset, but their fear didn't change God or the path of the sun. Traveling to Barrow would probably be pretty jarring if you'd never lived through polar night before. That much darkness can make people anxious and depressed, even knowing that it will not last forever.

The polar night is serious and yet...the sun returns. Here and now, so many of our usual signs and rhythms are different. And yet... our hope is alive. Here, as we begin the season of Advent, we find that hope is greater than our immediate surroundings. It is greater than what we can figure out or create for ourselves. Hope looks at the polar night and says, “the sun will come up one day.” Here and now, we prepare for Jesus who comes to us – first as a baby, then as a

friend in our lives and our hearts, and ultimately as the Son of Man at the end of days. The One who came so many years ago, meets us now, and returns for us all in the fullness of time.

In the weeks that follow, there will be many changes and accommodations. The virus seems likely to continue raging all around us. Yet, our hope remains unconquerable. Jesus is here and he will guide us in justice and righteousness. Fear not, in Jesus Christ, we see that our hope lives. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/11/18/polar-night-utqiagvik-darkness/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.jtsa.edu/adams-fear-of-a-darkening-world>