

Signs of the Times

Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. We were all on our way to heaven; we were all on our way to hell.” Thus Charles Dickens famously begins his *A Tale of Two Cities*. In describing the age of the French Revolution, Dickens seems not to know whether to describe the age positively or negatively. Perhaps Dickens knew enough about world history and political movements to know that it’s hard to make a verdict on the machinations of the present moment. Is this the worst of times or the best of times? Who knows? Sometimes things turn out different from what you first expected. There are events that seem undeniably negative yet turn out to be surprisingly positive.

A good friend of mine in my youth was the beneficiary of a large lottery winning when he was just getting started with a career in construction.

“He’s got it made,” we said. “He’s on Easy Street for the rest of his life,” we agreed.

But then you hear the tale of those who squander it all away, become the real life enactment of the younger brother in the Prodigal Son. They go through the massive winnings in just a few years. Do things like become addicted to expensive, so-called “fashion drugs.” Life is ended at forty-nine; friendless, alone, and sad.

“Who knew that his good fortune was his undoing?” says one.

“A victim of incredibly good luck gone bad,” says another.

Of course, the obverse can be true. Sometimes the worst things that happen to us turn out to be the best. If we had the time I could name for you people of my acquaintance who went through a time of bad luck, suffering disappointment and pain, who will tell you today, looking back, that what they thought was the end, was actually the beginning. Their presumed bad luck became their surprising good luck.

Sometimes our bad luck becoming good is due to just, well, good luck. Life can be funny. Things can work out better than you thought they would.

And sometimes bad events become good, our tears turn to laughter because of God. Oh, we're conditioned to think that our actions are the only actions in the world. We are the ones who must make history turn out right or it won't happen. But what if it's not all left up to us? What if behind the scenes, there works one whose work is greater than our work?

I've got this on my mind because this Sunday, as is customary in our church, as we move toward the end of the church's year, Jesus's talk is about the end. Jesus is coming to the end of his earthly journey. He moves at last into Jerusalem. There, as you know, he will meet his end. He will die on a cross.

And on his way to the end, Jesus speaks of our end. The grand and glorious temple, Jesus says, will be torn down, lie in ruins. Jerusalem, the Holy City, the centre of national pride and identity, will lie in ruins. At last the Romans will move to put an end to these Jewish trouble makers and their rabble rousing messiahs.

It's not a pretty picture of the end. Jerusalem, that place where God dwells, the temple, God's holy house, destroyed. All of Israel's hopes and dreams at an end.

And yet, even amid the predictions of pain and loss, Jesus urges us to look up and bear testimony, to witness to the world that, in spite of it all, God reigns. Witness to what? Testimony for what purpose?

"What are we supposed to say to the world when the world is falling apart, coming unglued, and seemingly going to hell in a handbasket?" the disciples may have asked.

What can we say? We can say that this world, in any of its lostness and pain, is God's world. We can testify that this time is not our time. It's God's good time and God will not be defeated by the

sorry course of human history.

The book club is currently reading On Fire by Naomi Klein and she includes some information on Greta Thunberg who was seriously depressed by the current news about global warming. She was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism. She was angered and upset by people in high places who steadfastly ignored or refused to believe the plain facts about our imperiled planet. She can no longer watch the news when the subject is the latest report on global warming.

She was so depressed about it that she convinced her family to become vegetarian and to not fly in planes (which was quite a sacrifice for her mother who is an opera singer) but she felt she had to do something. It is like the climate scientist who said "I'm just one little person. But I try to do my bit. I recycle, and I got a compost heap. I am really trying to lesson my 'carbon footprint' but it feels like I'm standing on the beach trying to hold back a great wave sweeping over me. Future generations will look back and condemn us for our lack of effort to stop global warming," she says.

What would be your testimony to the thousands of justifiably concerned young people in our world?

Oh, when we suffer some personal set back we can get busy, make a plan, take matters in hand and try to fix the problem. But what do you do when the cataclysm coming up against you is global, cosmic, utterly out of your control?

As you know, people around the world have been upset about America's political climate. As you are well aware, many are concerned about the language and the atmosphere that's provoked by some of that countries leaders.

What do you say to the person who's only got one vote, when their meagre political contributions can't compete with the millions that is pumped into politics these days?

A couple of years ago a book (An Extraordinary Time of God: Karl Barth's World War I

Sermons) was published that contains a number of Karl Barth's sermons that Barth preached when he was a young pastor in Safenwil, a forlorn little village in Switzerland. All of the sermons were preached during a frightening, cataclysmic period in Europe's history. And yet Barth interprets the events of World War I, not as world-ending, terrible episodes but rather as world-beginning opportunities whereby God is unmasking and exposing human sin and falsehood in order to lead us to a new place.

All the hopes for the triumph of glorious Germanic culture, said Barth, are being smashed by our own hands. We are seeing where our national arrogance has led us. Now, for the first time in our collective history, we are seeing ourselves truthfully.

That's the thing about interpretation of the signs of the times as Christians. Are we living in a time of death or a time of birth, a day of Good Friday defeat or Easter Sunday? There is a sense in which we don't know, not only because who can say how history turns out but also who can say what God is up to in our history, working behind the scenes, bringing all things toward God?

What do you say?

Well, you can say that when the sky turns dark, when beloved, eternal-appearing institutions crumble, and stone is cast down upon stone (that is, just the sort of cataclysmic situation of this Sunday's Gospel), you can say that these troubled times can be God's time. We have a God whom we know (in Jesus Christ) does not leave us to stew in our own juice, does not leave us to our own devices.

And because we have that sort of redemptive God even our worst times can be good times. Jesus predicts the complete destruction of the beloved Jerusalem temple. He thereby foresees the end of a world, the end of an age, the loss of so much that so many held dear.

And what does Jesus tell those who are about to be shaken by the loss of their world? "Look

up! This is a great time for you to bear testimony. This is the perfect time for you to be a witness.” It’s not all left up to us. We do not have it in our hands to defeat God’s good purposes in creation. Though our time may be a time of hard work, a time of much unrest and painful relinquishment, this time, even our time, is God’s. That’s the message God has given us to say to a frightened, uneasy world.

Tomorrow at the office, or in the classroom, or in the sick room, or as you drink coffee with friends, go ahead, be a witness. Jesus is not asking you to be some starry-eyed, goofy optimist: “Don’t worry, be happy. Everything’s going to be alright. Today is as good as it gets.”

Jesus is asking you to give testimony that this world is God’s. In Jesus Christ God has decisively entered human time and made it God’s time. God has taken time from us. God has taken time for us.

The question for each one of us: Will you bear testimony? Will you be a witness? Thanks be to God. Amen.