

There Will Be Signs...of Hope
by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
For Berkeley Chinese Community Church
December 2, 2018 • First Sunday of Advent • 11 am

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵ 'There will be 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. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.'

³⁴ 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'



It's officially the Season of Advent. Look around you – we have purple paraments that remind us we are on our annual journey to Bethlehem. This is one of my favorite images of BCCC – Advent and these altar decorations created by our own Shirgie and Kovick Chan! We can see Bethlehem way off in the distance this week...and as we get closer to Christmas, Bethlehem will look like it's closer! We have a Christmas tree with the angel on top...we have Christmas garlands and wreaths and bows. Our own Christmas elves came together yesterday for our traditional the hanging of the greens. Thank you, elves!

The candle of hope is lit and I'm wearing my purple stole. It is the season of Advent. We might remember that Advent means "coming"...and that it's from the Latin word '*adventus*,' which means "coming." But, did you know that that word '*adventus*' is translated from the Greek word '*parousia*'? and '*parousia*' refers to the Second Coming of Christ. Well - **this** puts a new spin on things: Advent isn't just about the birth of God's love anew in our hearts and our very lives with the coming of the Christ child in a stable in Bethlehem, Advent is also about the **Second** Coming of the Christ.



And on **that** day, there will be 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. And people will faint from terror and foreboding of what is coming into the world.



Suddenly Christmas isn't about making room at the inn and preparing a place for a baby;



it's about boarding up our windows and jumping into safe sanctuaries and locking our doors. Suddenly Christmas isn't full of cheer, it's full of terror. At least that's what it looks like at first glance.

I don't think I can really explain what Jesus is saying here about the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. I'm not sure any preacher could. The imagery is so overwhelming that I'm not sure **any** words can explain it. But all that overwhelming imagery, all that terrifying stuff...that isn't really the point anyway. What Jesus is telling the people is that in the midst of what we consider to be terrifying, there is Good News. When the walls are caving in all around us, when we're going through struggle and loss, when hard times are lingering around us wherever we are, it's a sign that Good News is at hand, that Good News is with us, that Good News is present.



And that Good News is so good that it rises up in the middle of all that terror and makes it not look so terrifying.



Those kinds of experiences...those kinds of memories, for me, help to strengthen connecting terror to hope....to train my “eyesight” if you will to see even the terror as a sign of good news.

OK that’s all fine and dandy and it may take a while to benefit from the “training” and to see the signs and to interpret the signs...



Jesus’ parable of the fig tree can give us a clue about how to read the signs. How I see it is that the Advent signs are as ordinary and common as a fig tree sprouting leaves. We see the leaves and we know something is happening. Summer is already near. It’s a new season, with new life, new growth, new fruit. And isn’t that the promise and good news of the Advent signs. And yet that promise, that good news, is fulfilled not apart from...but in and through the reality of our life’s circumstances and our world’s events, no matter how difficult or tragic or horrific they may be.

So, what if we looked in our lives today and our world today and we began to read and understand the signs in our Advent stories as sprouting leaves?

What would we see?

What would it mean?



Well – one of life’s realities is that I have announced I will be leaving as your pastor...Feb. 28th will be my last day when I have the blessing of using the title: acting pastor of BCCC. Some of you have received the letter already – and the rest of you will, if you haven’t. We all knew when I came that this was to be a temporary thing – in fact a rather short term thing. Folks – it has been over 3 years...and we have done amazing things together with God.

As I understand my call, it was to

- facilitate the church’s desire to be one church family in spite of differences: language – English & Chinese; theological; and mission priorities (service vs. evangelism)

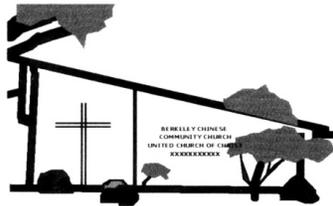
- assist the church's understanding of the its history, current context and to articulate a vision for future ministry;
- and to help the church prepare for calling the next settled pastor.

It has been my honor and absolute blessing to have served as pastor at this my home church for 3-1/2 years...and now I feel that it is time for us to plan for my leaving.

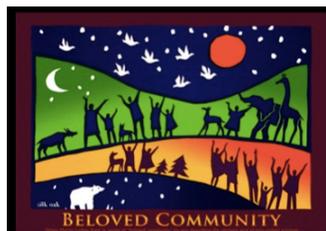
I feel that we have accomplished what God has called us together to do. You just have to look around any given Sunday or any BCCC event or activity and you will see one church family, both worshipping communities working together! Sure, we have disagreements - they happen, but despite our differences, we accept each other, we give each other hugs and continue to be one loving family.

We have completed our New Beginnings Sacred conversations about church history...we've done our church self assessments & evaluations and all that that points to BCCC's future. A Search Committee has been formed. They worked hard to develop and complete of the church profile. It is live and out there for the world to respond to. An active search for the next settled pastor has begun and ministerial profiles are being accepted. All is well.

My agreement calls for a 90 day notice of separation. The letter which I dated yesterday and began to distribute yesterday, announces I will end my time as your Acting Pastor on February 28, 2019. Just so you'll know, I am currently in conversation with another body to serve in a very short term call after which I will *completely retire (I think)*. The conversation with this other church began almost 6 months ago – when there was still much to do with you here. But now – it is time to prepare for my leaving as your pastor.



So right now – in the life of the church – *this* is happening...and remember, today's scripture reminds us of the Advent signs - Whatever it is – whatever is happening - It would mean that the kingdom of God is near. That heaven on earth is near...that God's Beloved Community is near...



It would mean we are entering a new season.

It would mean we are entering a new year – today is the first Sunday of the new church calendar year...

It would mean we wish one another Happy New Year!

It would mean we would see new life and new growth.

It would mean we would produce new fruit...we could open the doors of our life with new courage and confidence.

It would mean...we could look on the world with a new sense of compassion and hope.

It would mean we would be strengthened to do the work God has given us to do.

And maybe the Advent seasons of our lives can be long, difficult, and painful. But we never face those seasons without the signs of hope and reassurance, signs that point to the one who is coming.

“There will be signs,” Jesus said...and today of all days, we can say – yes – there will be signs...of hope. Amen.