

HOW TO INTERPRET THE TIMES

Looking at this week's passage reminded me of the movie Bruce Almighty. If you haven't seen that movie, it stars Jim Carrey. Jim plays a down and out newscaster named Bruce Nolan. Bruce blames God for his troubles. At one point, Bruce is headed down a highway asking God for some sort of sign. Ironically, along the way he passes a group of signs. The signs say things like, "Slow Down," "Danger Ahead," and "Stop Now." As Bruce passes all these signs he keeps saying, "I need a sign." Yet, he ignores a group of signs he has right in front of him.

Do you ever wish God would give you a sign? Do you ever wish you had just one signal so that you could see for sure that God is at work around you? There's a lot of talk about signs in some parts of the church today. Usually, this talk is connected with those who believe the World is coming to an end.

So, what is going on in this passage? Jesus says, "I come to bring fire to the Earth." This sounds very much like a warning to us. This brings to mind very apocalyptic images. But I don't think that's really what Jesus is after. The big point, is not so much about the threat as it is about the people who see the signs.

Jesus says, "You see a cloud in the west and you say, 'It is going to rain.' You see a wind from the south and you say, 'It will be scorching heat.'" You hypocrites. You know how to interpret the signs of the earth, but you don't know how to interpret the signs of the times."

What is this business with interpreting the signs of the times? You know Jesus is right. If I see a thunderhead, and it's off to the west, I know it's going to rain soon. However, interpreting the time in which I live is not so easy.

Jesus lived in a world that we can scarcely imagine. The average life expectancy was about forty- five years. Tax rates could be as high as fifty to seventy percent. Disease was rampant with pandemics hitting about every 10-15 years. Natural disasters often meant hundreds or even thousands of casualties. The Romans controlled Judea and exploited it for their own purposes. The rich exploited the poor in ways we find cruel. There was no such thing as a social safety net. If you didn't own land and you weren't a merchant or a town artisan, you were reduced to starvation wages at the best of times; when times were bad you were just reduced to starvation.

Into this world strode Jesus, making bold claims of salvation. The blind can see and the lame can walk. I come to proclaim the year of the Lord. Can you blame people for being skeptical? They could see the miracles that Jesus performed. They could hear the good news he proclaimed. But they didn't see times getting better. When times around you are bad, it's hard to receive good news even when it happens right in front of you.

So, I wonder. Is it really just that they didn't see the sign that they were hoping to see? The Judeans were expecting the Messiah to come. They were expecting a King like King David.

They were expecting someone who was a wise judge, who would rule them with justice and mercy. They were expecting someone who would be a military leader: someone who would oust the hated Romans and make them powerful again. They were expecting someone who would restore the prosperity of the past. They were looking for signs that pointed to the leader they wanted. What they got instead was Jesus.

Jesus wasn't particularly powerful. He didn't make anyone rich- not even himself. He didn't lead any people in battle. He didn't oust the Romans. Life was no better for most people in Judea the day of his death than the day of his birth- at least in earthly terms. But if you knew what to look for, the signs were right there in front of you.

Jesus didn't come to make us wealthy or powerful or important. He came to save us from ourselves and to teach us to live as God created us to live. If you were looking for that kind of leader, it's obvious who Jesus was.

We live in a world right now that is not a fun place to live. We have just come through a pandemic, but it's the only one most of us have known in our lives. We have taxes, sometimes they seem crushing, but I've never known them to be at seventy percent. We have a much longer life expectancy than the ancients, but that doesn't mean all is good.

Life today is bad enough. We've lost millions of jobs to outsourcing and automation. Some people who do have jobs are working two or three jobs with no benefits, just to make ends meet. We are still in the midst of an opioid crisis, and we're seeing massive social disruption. I could go on and on. Times are bad today.

I love to read. Recently, I've been reading two series of books; one series is called Delphi in Space and the other is called the Space Legacy series. Neither of these series are going to win awards for literature, but I'm not looking for a book like that. When I read at night, I don't want to read something heavy. Both of these series have essentially the same plot, though they approach it in the same way. In both series the main character stumbles upon an alien spaceship that has been hidden for a long period of time. The spaceship contains advanced technology that if harnessed correctly could revolutionize life on earth, making all of our lives better. These stories are really a retelling of Aladdin and the magic lamp. I understand why these stories appeal to me. Sometimes it seems that a cave of wonders is the only thing that could save us. How do you find God in such a world?

Sadly, some people don't. Some people in our society have turned their backs on God. They have just stopped looking. Some of them no longer believe- assuming they ever did. Others look for God, but not in this world. They're focused strictly on the world to come. The goal is to get saved. If you know you're going to heaven when you die, then you can white-knuckle it through this world. When you get to heaven, that's where you'll find God.

However, I think differently. I see the hand of God in this world and in the next. If you know where to look, you can see God at work around us. In the early church, Jesus asked

people to do something radical. The message of the early church was, "Believe in Jesus. Give up your worries. Be content with what you have. Give your life to the service of God and neighbor." If you look for that, you can still see the hand of God in this world.

When I see people responding to the next natural disaster, I see the hand of God. When I see people comforting someone who has lost everything, I see the hand of God. When I see people giving money they don't have, I see the hand of God.

How do you interpret the times? If you're looking only at the negative things going on around us, you might conclude that the world is disintegrating. However, if you look for the hand of God in the everyday interactions of people, you might see Jesus at work even today.