Sunday, November 28, 1982
SIGNS OF THE TIMES
Luke 21:25-28

The world is filled with signs. Most of them are helpful and necessary. As we travel down our modern highways, the signs remind us of how far it is to our destination and where to turn off. They also tell us in what direction we are traveling. Other signs tell us about rest stops, service stations and food.

In many parts of our world, we would be lost without signs to direct us. Large air terminals, for example, are often-times confusing enough, but would be impossible without signs. Because of the signs we can usually find our way to the proper gate at the proper time.

There are many kinds of signs to which we need to pay attention. Most illnesses that come to us are accompanied by signs which are sometimes called symptoms or pain. If we take these signs seriously and know how to interpret them and then act on the information, we might be saving our lives. But if we disregard the signs or symptoms, the results may be fatal.

Our world is filled with signs. Some are easy to interpret and understand and others are not. We've all taken the driver's test in which we have to tell the meaning of a number of road signs by their shape.

The basic fact to keep in mind about a sign, however, is that it does not have significance in itself, but is always pointing to something. Thus, the miracles which Jesus performed are called signs in the New Testament. They are exactly that. They are signs pointing to the love, the mercy and the forgiveness of God.

Thus, Christ always resisted the temptation to perform a miracle that would not be a sign pointing to something but would rather draw attention to itself. He would not do tricky things just for the amusement of people. He knew that such signs would be like a road sign which only pointed to itself.

Imagine driving down the road and off in the distance you see some kind of large sign. It is brightly colored, has flashing lights and attracts your attention from a long way off. It's so big that you cannot help looking at it. Finally, as you get close enough, you read the large letters which say, "THIS IS A SIGN." That of course violates the nature of what a sign is supposed to be. It reminds me of the bumper stickers which say simply, "BUMPER STICKER."

On the other hand, when we are driving down the highway and a sign tells us that we are five miles from our destination, we do not focus our attention on the materials used to make the sign, the color the style of letters, whether it is nailed or bolted together. Our attention is on what the sign says, what it points to, the fact that we are five miles from our destination.

Our scripture reading this morning from Luke's Gospel is about signs Jesus said, "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the seas and waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Here again, remember that the point is not the sign of the signs, but rather what they are pointing to. If we spend too much time analyzing the nature of the sign itself, we miss the whole point of the sign.

Thus, Jesus spoke these words, not to strike terror within us so much as to illustrate that as the redemptive love and power of God take hold in this world, a convulsive reaction does indeed take place. Thus, when you see perplexity and the powers of the heavens shaken and when some are fearful and there is distress, look up, for precisely at such times God is entering this world.

In other words, God does not shake the world to its roots to see people shudder and tremble. But God's coming is often resisted. WE don't want to change. The world does not want to change. Many people in Jesus's time didn't want to accept his way of love and non-resistance. So it is that change, even change for the better often brings distress. We don't like to change our ideas and our prejudices. In our private lives, we know how God's Spirit must struggle with us to pry us loose from vanity, greed, and envy in our settled ways and habits. How much more on a world-wide scale. For us to change our basic assumptions is often more than we can bear. We are afraid.

So it is that God's love coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ shakes things up. "Love your enemies. Bless those who persecute you. If one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." That's against all of the world's basic assumptions. "Give your life away to find it." "Do not be anxious about your life. You cannot serve two masters. If you say you love God and hate another person, you are a liar." These words can and do cause distress among us.

But these words of Jesus in our text this morning tell us not to be afraid of this distress. Do not be afraid when you see the signs of change. Emerging nations come into being with the same travail that marks our personal birth into this life. When major power shifts take place in the world or in our personal lives, there is distress, for we do not give up our old ways easily.

But says Jesus, "look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." In other words, in the midst of calamitous change, keep your eye on God and not on the change itself, not on the signs themselves but what the signs are pointing to. The signs are pointing to God's power and salvation.

This scripture reading from Luke's Gospel is read on this first Sunday in Advent because just as God entered the world on the first Christmas, it reminds us that God is always entering our world, and this can cause distress because it means we have to change our ways. But don't worry, keep your eye on God and you will come through it for the better.

This morning too, these elements of Communion, the bread and wine, are also signs. They are not important in themselves, but in what they point to. They point to God's love poured out for us in the birth, death and resurrection of Christ. They also point to the fact that God is within us. God is within us as intimately as this bread and wine enters our bodies and spreads throughout our system. So, this morning we can look up, raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near. Amen.