

Signs Along the Way, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. A1061203
Psalm 25:1-10 and Luke 21:25-36
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 3 December, 2006

Just a note as we read Luke 21:25-36, one of the “apocalyptic” passages of the Bible, or a “revealing of the end times.” As Fred Craddock has noted, the scriptures were not written to us. We are overhearing the Gospel which was spoken and written to an audience of a much earlier day. Luke recorded these words to give hope to Christians who were living under deadly oppressive conditions. Folks have been predicting the end of the world and setting dates for its occurrence for two thousand years at least. As we read these apocalyptic passages, we do not have to be wracking our brains trying to figure out secret or hidden meanings. We read them knowing that they gave and continue to give hope and confidence to Christians who suffer under persecution. We gain hope knowing that all things are ultimately in the hands of a God who loves and cares for all in spite of human powers and principalities.

When we take a trip, I am thankful for Road signs along the way. They give directions, so we know if we're traveling north or south, heading to Greensboro or Raleigh. They tell us what speed is proper for conditions and so there won't be a great speed differential between cars. They warn us of road conditions and dangers such as curves, workers. Sometimes they tell us about local practices and ordinances such as where we can park. And, some signs along the way tell us where we can get good bite to eat or how much the fuel costs.

Signs can be confusing, though. Traveling west out of Detroit on I-696, one sees a sign at I-275 interchange. The first time I saw it, I began heading in the wrong direction. I know that Lansing is west, or straight ahead, and that Toledo is south, or left. The road to Lansing goes straight, and the road to Toledo bends right and curls left over the road to Lansing. The road sign does not indicate that, though. It is confusing. It indicates that the road to Lansing curves left and the road to Toledo is straight, as though Lansing is South and Toledo is West! At the last second, I realized the sign was unclear, switched lanes rapidly, and headed to Toledo, which was my destination. Signs must be clear or they can confuse the reader and cause accidents.

Jesus talked about the clarity of signs. These were pretty important ones referring to the end of the age! You don't want to misread signs dealing with eternity!

In Jesus' day, as is the case today, there were a lot of people who wanted to know when the end of world would come. I don't know why. Would knowing when the end of the world will be allow a person to continue sinning and then at the last minute make restitution with God? We should live every day as if it were our last, saying we're sorry to those we've hurt, and making sure that our affairs are in order.

Then, as now, the signs about the end of the world could be misleading. That was not Jesus' purpose in talking about signs of the end of the age. He said, “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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”¹ He was not saying these things so that people would be driven to do desperate acts. In fact, he was doing the opposite. He wanted his listeners to remain firm in their faith. He said, “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

That is good news, not news over which to despair. It's good news for those who worship God with all their hearts.

Be careful when people tell you about signs of the impending end of the world! Jesus said elsewhere that we won't be able to know the times or seasons when the Son of Man will come again: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware,

¹Luke 21:25-26

keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”²

I don't know when the end of the age will come, but I know that I can stand up and raise my head because I try to live each day as if it will be my last. That's all Jesus was asking: to get his followers to remain faithful. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life...”

So, if you're concerned about end of the age, believe that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah) and change your ways by following his teachings. Love God, love your neighbor, and love your enemies, and treat others the way you want to be treated.

We need road signs on life's journey. It can be a confusing journey, and road signs can be misleading. Often, the Christian goes in a different direction than the culture. The Christian is often found swimming against the tide when others drift aimlessly with it. Take Advent, for instance. Everything the church does during Advent is in direct contrast to the secular celebration of Christmas. While the stores and malls are decorated red and green, the church paraments are purple. While stores play Christmas carols, the church sings songs of waiting and preparation. Why is that?

The church, following the lead of Jesus Christ, is often the questioner or the mirror of the face of culture. To the “You have heard it said, Jesus answers, “But I say to you...” I hear people remark, “It says in the Bible, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’” and they think that gives them the Biblical foundation for taking revenge. They forget what Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;”³

The church gives us different Road signs. While secular culture anxiously pushes Christmas, and children push us to open presents long before the holy day, the lesson the church gives is that of patience. Christmas will come. Be patient. It is like the secret Mary, pregnant with Jesus, shared with her cousin Elizabeth. The Christian is patient for the coming of Christmas and for the coming of God's reign at the end of the age.

Jesus gives us road signs. His culture is different from secular culture. While our culture promotes spending, Jesus' road sign says “give.” This is a “giving zone.”

While the secular culture raises fears about immigrants or about people who are different that we, Jesus' road sign says, “welcome others.” This is a “hospitality zone.”

While secular culture says amass all the wealth and possessions you can, Jesus' road sign says “follow me. All you own and possess will be meaningless when I call you home.”

We await the end of the world, the second coming of the Messiah, with anxiety, but God's time is not our time. The Messiah has already come, and God's kingdom is being realized in the hearts of those who accept God's love, and who follow Jesus as Lord and savior.

I see the signs God has given us to follow along the way. I see a Bible that gives instructions about loving and giving. I see travel companions --fellow Christians and church members here and around the world, now, and in the past, and in the future. Jesus called for a special relationship among these travel companions. Paul said, “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.”⁴

I see a Communion table which feeds us with spiritual food for the journey. it is a sign just like a McDonald's sign on a long trip indicates a place where people of all ages are welcome, especially kids.

I see a baptistery which assures us of a cleansing. We need not be afraid of the end of the age.

Finally, I see Christmas decorations which remind me not to spend money, but rather that God is with us--all around: Immanuel!

²Mark 13:32-33

³Matthew 5:38-39

⁴1 Thes. 3:12