

WPC  
Rev. Ken Sunoo  
March 7, 2010

The Merciful Judge  
Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

My preaching professor from seminary tells a story about an event that occurred in the little Georgia country church of his childhood. The tale involved a certain Sunday night in October 1938. Evening prayer services were in full swing when a man named Sam, a member of the congregation who lived down the road from the church, charged into the prayer meeting trembling with fear and excitement. Finally gaining the breath to speak, he shouted, "Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships! Some of 'em have already landed in New Jersey!" The preacher halted in mid-sentence; the congregation stared at Sam blankly. "I s-s-swear," he stammered, now a little unsure of his footing. "I h-h-heard it on the radio."

What Sam had heard, of course, was Orson Welles's now infamous Mercury Theater radio production of *War of the Worlds*, [*explain story if necessary*] but no one in the congregation was aware of that at the moment. For all they knew, the world outside was coming to a flaming end. The congregation looked apprehensively at the preacher, but he was mute and indecisive, never having had a sermon disrupted by interplanetary invasion.

Finally one of the oldest members of the congregation, a farmer of modest education, stood up, gripped the pew in front of him with his large, callused hands, and said, "I 'speck what Sam says ain't completely true, but if it is true, we're in the right place here in church. Let's go on with the meetin'." And so they did.<sup>1</sup>

Spaceships landing in New Jersey? Signs of the end of the world? The old farmer gave it some thought and decided it was better to be in church praising God than running around town in a panic.

According to Jesus, most of us are not nearly as perceptive as this farmer at reading the signs of the times, at distinguishing what matters from what doesn't. Indeed, just several verses before today's passage, Jesus says that most of us are, as Tom Long says, "far better at meteorology than theology." "You hypocrites!" Jesus thunders. "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Luke 12:56)

Jesus says that we are to be alert and on the lookout for the breaking-in of God's reign. But he tells us that we often look in the wrong places and don't really have a clue how to interpret the signs.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2001, p. 11.

Which brings us to today's passage. No sooner had Jesus issued this challenge than some people step forward: "Jesus, have you heard about the terrible incident where Pilate ordered some Galileans' blood to be mingled with their sacrifices? Perhaps that's the kind of sign we should be looking for?"

"No," Jesus responds, "that isn't a sign. And neither is the tragic case where the tower of Siloam collapsed and killed 18 people. That's not the kind of sign I mean either."

So what does Jesus mean? What is the sign of God's time? Hold that thought - we'll get to that in a moment.

First, let's turn our attention to this report the people bring to Jesus and Jesus' response. On one level, the people wonder if these stories are signs of God's time, but on another level, these reports of suffering carried with them questions of a deeper meaning.

Jesus is in conversation with people who are trying to make sense of two tragic incidents. One is an example of human evil, at the hands of Pilate, the other a natural event, an accident. The people want to know if there's any correlation between suffering and human sin. Why did these things happen?

Jesus doesn't answer their question but he does challenge their assumptions that there is always a correlation between suffering and specific sins. He does the same thing in John 9, when he and his disciples encounter a man blind from birth. His disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answers, "Neither this man nor his parent sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." In other words, Jesus denies that suffering was attributed to sin and shifts the attention to God using this situation as an opportunity to act.

In light of the recent devastating earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, I wish that Pat Robertson had read these texts more closely. Robertson's recent explanation of the earthquake in Haiti, namely, that Haiti's own people were to blame for once making a "pact to the devil," is similar to the ancient belief that painful experiences were signs of God's judgment.

Jesus clearly denounces this line of thought while challenging his audience to repent or perish. Anthony Robinson takes this to mean that "Jesus believes it better to be shaken by such events and take a hard look at ourselves than it is to have ready, pat answers that save us from self-examination."<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor says that in the south, this is what is called giving with one hand and taking away with the other: "No, Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony B. Robinson, Weekly Readings at [anthonybrobinson.com](http://anthonybrobinson.com), 3/1/10.

says, *there is no connection between the suffering and the sin.* Whew. *But unless you repent, you are going to lose some blood too.* Oh...It's not a bad thing for the people to feel the full fragility of their lives. It's not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark, not if it makes them turn toward the light."<sup>3</sup>

Turning towards the light – that's repentance. Luke follows the preceding chapter which focuses on the image of judgment with this call to repentance, and he follows the call to repentance with a parable Jesus tells of divine patience. Let's now get back to our question of what is the sign of God's time - the sign of God's time can be found in this parable about an orchard owner who was frustrated by a barren fig tree and ordered the gardener to cut the tree down. "Sir," pleads the gardener, "let me care for it and give it one more year to bear fruit."

The clue to the breaking in of God's reign is that God listens to the gardener: his grace and love halts the ax from cutting down the tree and his mercy gives us another year to bear fruit. God judges us for our actions and behavior, and yet God offers us an opportunity for repentance. We, the people of God, are the fig tree, and the good news is that we've been given

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p. 71.

another chance to bear fruit. There is yet time, because, as Fred Craddock notes, “God’s mercy is still in serious conversation with God’s judgment.”<sup>4</sup>

The sign of God’s time breaking into our world is all around us. Let me share with you one example: Pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner used to tell about the state-run mental hospital where truly hopeless cases were relegated to a back ward. The psychiatrists and other medical staff avoided this ward, making only the bare minimum of calls and writing off the patients there as unsalvageable.

Then a women’s group from a local church began, as a matter of compassion, to visit the patients in this hospital. No one bothered to tell them that the patients in the back ward were abandoned cases, so they visited them regularly, bringing flowers, fresh baked cookies, prayer, cheerfulness and mercy. Before long, some of the patients began to respond, a few of them even becoming healthy enough to move to other wards.

At one level, this was merely a church group doing what church groups do. At another level, it was a sign of the times.<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke Interpretation Commentary*, p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2001, p. 11.