

Road Signs  
Sermon on Luke 21:25-36 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, December 3, 2006

I read road signs literally. I find interpreting road signs literally is vastly superior to interpreting them symbolically or metaphorically, especially when it comes to minor matters such as red lights and stop signs. Some people, particularly here in Dallas, have clearly abandoned literal and even symbolic interpretation in favor of deconstruction, believing the sign means whatever you want it to mean. Thus “stop” becomes merely a suggestion to be followed only if it does not interfere with one’s cell phone conversation while eating a Cinnabon, applying makeup, or reading the *Wall Street Journal* as one drives to work.

Yes, I am a literalist: If the road sign tells me there is roadwork ahead or men working, I believe it, even if there is no clear evidence of roadwork currently being done or men actually working. And this, I think, is a violation of trust. If the sign says there is roadwork ahead, and I prepare for that reality by slowing down and becoming more alert, I feel a little betrayed when there is no real roadwork being done, nor workmen in sight. As a consequence, I am that much more likely to disregard the road signs the next time.

I think any sermon about the second coming of Christ is like my experience with the road signs. Here in Luke, as in other passages, we are told to watch out, to be careful, to get prepared, only for nothing to happen: no obvious indications that the coming of Jesus is any closer to happening than there were when Jesus uttered these words nearly two thousand years ago. And so again it is a matter of trust: Can we really believe the signs? Is it really true that after the “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars” and “the roaring of the sea and the waves” the world will at last “see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory”? Or is the promise of Christ’s return, like the road signs, something to be noticed but not to be believed?

Our difficulty believing the truth concerning Christ's promised return is two-fold. Part of the problem is just how long we've been waiting. Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Joel, and Amos told us to look for the coming day of the Lord—a day they insisted was close at hand. Isaiah and Joel both said, “the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty” (Isa. 13:6, Jl. 1:15). The fact that the coming of the day of the Lord could happen some day soon, perhaps even tomorrow, is sobering and tends to focus the mind. But as Will Willimon says, “It's difficult to live every day believing that there may be no tomorrow. By the time Luke's Gospel was written, the church had been waiting for 75 or 80 years for the return of Christ, and that was a long time to be standing on tiptoe. It's difficult to maintain a sense of crisis for 80 years.”<sup>1</sup> How much harder, then, to maintain a sense of crisis for 2000 years! We have gotten a little tired of waiting. However, we tend not to be watchful or alert when we're tired.

The second part of the problem is that the day of the Lord's coming doesn't sound like something we would like. The prophets said the day of the Lord is “a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger” (Isa. 13:9); “a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations” (Ezek. 30:3). Amos asked, “Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light—pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?” (5:18-20, NIV) Jesus, too, suggested the day of his return would be fearsome, saying, “People will faint (literally they will stop breathing) from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world” (Lk. 21:26). And people will have good reason to fear: All these signs in the heavens and on the earth indicate that “the Son of Man [is] coming in a cloud with power and great glory. The day of the Lord is at last at hand.

---

<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, “Take Heed to Yourselves” in *The Christian Century*, December 3, 1986, reprinted at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1079>.

And the day of the Lord, the day of Jesus' promised return, is both good news and bad. The bad news is that this day will be a day of judgment. That is why the prophets warned about being overly eager for it and talked about the day of the Lord as a day of darkness and doom. These verses, then, remind us to live as a people prepared to face the judgment. We might begin our preparations, as is proper in the season of Advent, to ask ourselves some tough questions. In Lk. 9:26 Jesus says, "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory." We need to ask ourselves if we boldly proclaim our faith in Jesus in what we do and in what we say, or if we live as though we are ashamed of Jesus and his message. In Lk. 12:8-9 Jesus promises that "everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God." We need to ask ourselves if we acknowledge the Lord before others, speaking freely of him in our conversations, or if by our embarrassed silence we deny him.

The fact that we are waiting for the kingdom works against us. We tend to think that we have all the time in the world, no need to live with urgency. We've waited for 2000 years, so what's the rush? After all, isn't that what grace is all about, a second chance, an opportunity to try again? And won't God give us a warning before Jesus comes again? Isn't that the point of the "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars"—to create "unmistakable cosmic signs"<sup>2</sup> that no one could miss? Yes, there will be signs, signs that we ignore at our peril, for as Jesus said, "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (Lk. 12:40).

The good news is for those who have read the road signs, who know what to expect, and who live faithful lives accordingly. When the faithful "see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud'

---

<sup>2</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, New Interpreters Bible vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 407.

with power and great glory” they will not be afraid or filled with foreboding. The signs of Jesus’ coming will not cause distress or terror. Instead, the coming of the Lord will be an occasion to “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (21:28). The coming of the Lord in a cloud is the fulfillment of the vision of the prophet Daniel, who “saw one like a son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. ... To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed” (7:13, 14). Here, at last, is the coming of the King promised by the Scriptures, the Son of Man whose rule is forever and ever.

The advent of the Son of Man is further good news for his faithful children because his coming brings with it freedom and release. As Alan Culpepper puts it, “Whereas the Son of Man will come to judge the wicked, his coming means deliverance for the faithful.”<sup>3</sup> As Luke envisions it, Jesus comes both to judge the earth and to deliver Christian disciples. Jesus comes in the cloud with power and great glory to deliver his own. For the faithful, the day of the Lord is a day of deliverance. Thus, “Jesus’ followers are not to share the fear and foreboding [of others]; in contrast, their attitude will be one of rising and joyful, upright expectation. They will stand to welcome their deliverance.”<sup>4</sup> Charles Wesley expresses this joyful hope of all believers, in his majestic line, “Rejoice in glorious hope! Jesus the Judge shall come, and take His servants up to their eternal home.”<sup>5</sup>

How shall we get home? Let us heed the road signs, the ones that warn us of what is ahead, and being alert and aware, live boldly proclaiming that Jesus the Lord will come again.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible vol. 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 1350.

<sup>5</sup> The first line of the ultimate stanza of “Rejoice, the Lord Is King.”