

“Red sky at morning, sailor take warning. Red sky at night, sailor’s delight.” You may be familiar with this old saying. In our Gospel passage from Luke, Jesus is carrying on two conversations at once – one with the disciples, and one with the crowd nearby. He tells the crowd:

“When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?”

In Matthew’s version of this episode, Jesus addresses instead the Pharisees and Saducees:

“When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”

In either case, the message we may take from it is the same – we are clever enough to interpret all manner of signs and trends, in the living of our lives. But still are oblivious to the most important things of all – what is holy, what matters to God.

An aside – I looked a bit into the “Red sky at morning” saying, which comes, I guess, from Matthew 16. It is an adage that has had a long life. Shakespeare uses it in the poem *Venus and Adonis* (453-456):

*Like a red morn, that ever yet betoken’d
Wreck to the seaman, tempest to the field,
Sorrow to shepherds, woe unto the birds,
Gusts and foul flaws to herdmen and to herds.*

It appears there’s some truth in the old weather lore. Storm systems, at least in our hemisphere, move generally from west to east. As sunlight passes through the atmosphere it bounces off water vapor and dust particles, and that causes the color of the sky that our eyes see. At night or at sunrise we are seeing the sun’s light through the thickest part of our atmosphere. Blue gets lost because it has short wavelengths. Red color has long wavelengths. If the sky is red at sunset, you know you are seeing sunlight through a lot of dust particles. That most often means high pressure and stable air coming from the west. Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. When the light is red at sunrise, we’re seeing dust particles that have passed and a storm system moving west to east – low pressure, and a rush of air in to fill it. Red sky at morning, sailor take warning.

Okay, I know what you are thinking – those first-century Jews did not have internet, to Google up “Red sky at morning, etc.” Exactly. Jesus used the example of their weather lore because they were close to the land, and daily activity depended on anticipating storms, depended on the accuracy of their perceptions. No Weather Channel. They were largely rural people who knew their environment.

Or did they? Jesus chastised them - *When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?*

“You know when it is going to rain, and when it is going to be hot, but you can't read that there is a storm brewing that will sweep all our politics and societal norms before it.” Or words to that effect.

If Jesus were speaking these words to us, we who are more removed from the weather by our air-conditioning and modern amenities, would he have used another example? He might have said: “When you see interest rates rising, you immediately say, ‘We better pay down the balance on the credit card,’ And when you see the stock market drop, you say, ‘I better make sure I'm diversified, and maybe take a look at the money market.’ Hypocrites. You know how to interpret the financial markets, but not how to read the signs of our times.” Maybe he would say it that way.

That was his conversation with the crowd. With the disciples, at the very same time, he had a sidebar conversation going, using very strong and disturbing imagery.

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

Passing through the fire of testing was even then common enough imagery, and in a dramatic turn Jesus ties that to baptism – a disturbing image, a baptism of fire, not water this time. And he is not describing here something inflicted on others, but what he has to go through himself. It should have been surprising to the disciples – and would have been surprising to Luke's first readers - to hear that Jesus was the first to pass through that baptism, and for us. Luke is describing to us his confrontation with the authorities of the world, then his death and resurrection. It will not be a peaceable and irenic time. Peace will be disrupted, especially if peace means the status quo, or things as they are. A time of crisis and change. What this text says is that Jesus IS the crisis of the world, in the sense of being a personalized moment of truth, the tipping point. The non-canonical Gospel of Thomas quotes Jesus as saying: “Whoever is near me is near fire. Whoever is far from me is far from the Kingdom.”

Our Old Testament text from Isaiah tells of such a time of crisis. The prophet describes Israel as the vineyard which God has tended so carefully, and yet it doesn't produce. So the owner of the vineyard determines to abandon it to the wild, and send no rain upon it. God expected justice, but saw bloodshed, righteousness but heard only sobbing. The poetry doesn't translate into English very well. God expected mišpāt (justice) but saw mišpāh (bloodshed); desired sēdaqâ (righteousness) and heard only sē'āqâ (a cry). Justice and righteousness, and the violence and grief that are the opposite of that are described therefore as something systemic, exploitative.

Probably every age has thought it lived in the tipping point, in a time of crisis. And perhaps that is true, in some way, of every age. And yet I wonder if our present time is not just such a time when Jesus calls us to look at the signs. Red sky at morning.

We live in a time where reality itself – how we think of the world – has changed. The language most use is to say we have moved from the modern age to a post-modern age. In the modern age

we looked to science and reason to order the world and make sense of it. But enough death and senseless violence has led us to question whether there really *is* such a thing as progress. And so people have started again to wonder if there is not more meaning, more transcendence, more holiness, in the world than can ever be measured by reason alone. They are learning to pray again, in all kinds of ways. And the good news is – that spiritual hunger is finding expression in dozens on dozens of religious expressions. And the *bad* news may also be – that spiritual hunger is finding expression in dozens on dozens of religious expressions!

(Voltaire would have approved. He wrote, in *Reflections on Religion*, “... if you have two religions in your land, the two will cut each other’s throats; but if you have thirty religions, they will dwell in peace.”)

And the contest in the Christian Church over what the dominant expression of the Christian faith will be, has made interesting and contentious divisions. It gets expressed in what we have called the “Culture Wars.” A conservative evangelical Christianity wants to claim continuity with the Christian tradition, while what it really represents is certain cultural values more than it represents the historic faith. And the historic mainline denominations have become timid and uncertain. Perhaps it is to us – the old historic denominations - that Jesus says, “You can read the weather and the markets, but not the signs of the times!”

It is a different age we are moving into. And maybe we have to ask this question: Has the church become so identified with the ways of a vanishing culture that we cannot adapt to this new one? Or can we? “*The Church of Christ in every age...*” as the hymn goes. Richard Holloway, a contemporary Scottish theologian, writes that :

“Every way of ordering society has its shadow side and post-modernity is no exception. The issue is not whether it is imperfect, but whether any other way, including the one associated with religious conservatism, would be any better.”

In fact, it is of less use to debate whether we *like* the times and culture in which we live, but how do we live and work and proclaim the Gospel, in *whatever* time and place we find ourselves. And do so without assuming that the old ways necessarily reflected the mind of God any better than new ones. And can we learn to read the signs of the times, to know if Jesus might be taking us down some new trails. The point is that if Jesus is Himself the crisis point, the disturber of our peace, it will be safe to follow him anywhere he takes us. Red sky at morning, friends. And the coming storms may make for rough seas; but perhaps the winds will fill our sails.

Finally – in part aware that we are going to next week be baptizing Zoe Reid-St.John - let me share with you a “view from the pew”, if we can call it that – a posting off of an Internet blog, (which I *do* have permission to reproduce) from Robert Busch, an Elder at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque:

Well, I’ve been sitting here reading all these epistles about the comings and goings of the congregations and the future of the church, and mostly it is kinda depressing. I’m just a peon in

the pews so I don't get to (or have to) deal with the leadership (or lack thereof) to have a feel for the thread of hope that is keeping us together. However, sometimes there is a gift of grace that interjects itself into life and lets you know that the Spirit is moving among us. I remember a definition of grace from the Rev. Webster that went something like – when you see a turtle on the top of a mailbox, you know it didn't get there by itself. Anyhow, the grace that entered my life this morning was a baptism. Only it wasn't your ordinary baptism in the sense that it was readily apparent that the Spirit was obviously present and moving among us. It started with the introduction of the infant who promptly responded to the mention of her name by smiling, spreading her arms, and chuckling as if to say, "Yup, that's me!" Then when it came time for the baptism, we had to wait because she was sucking on the pastor's thumb. Yes, a first for him and most of the rest of us. She continued to be bright and cheerful throughout and when taken around to the congregation beamed proudly as if to say, "I appreciate your support and willingness to teach me, but I've got a whole bunch of stuff to teach you in return." Couple that with the presence of a large extended family and one of my favorite songs, "I was there to hear your borning cry," and I was saved. Nourished by the knowledge that with each other's support and a willingness to keep my eyes open, grace abounds and the Spirit will move us in the right direction. However, like that little girl, it will take a lot of time and a lot of giving for the church to grow into the place it ought to be. So this is a long rambling tapestry to say that it only takes a child to remind us that we won't get where we need to be without grace.

Thank you, Bob. And thanks be to God.