

Do you remember Harold Camping? He predicted Christ would come again on May 21, 2011. A whole bunch of people started listening to his fervent sermons and the noise of his movement even reached the tiny hamlet of keen farmers in rural Saskatchewan where I was pastoring. I had a number of townsfolk, and more than a number of church folk come to my office – or buy me a coffee at the Happy Shopper or meet me at the mailboxes and ask... “So...what do you make of this Harold Camping Jesus is coming soon stuff?”

People have been predicting the coming apocalypse since Christ’s ascension... and even before Christ, God’s people were looking for signs that God would surely send them a savior who would save them from war, and oppression.

In today’s scripture, Jesus’ followers were struggling, just like we are, to interpret what the signs around us could mean. Where was God? What were they to do?

The discourse between Jesus and the crowds went like this:

Luke 12:54-13:9

"When you see a cloud rising in the west,  
you immediately say, 'It is going to rain';  
and so, it happens.

<sup>55</sup> And when you see the south wind blowing,  
you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens."

Makes sense! Jesus says that most of us are far better at meteorology than theology.

<sup>56</sup> **You hypocrites!** He shouts!

You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Jesus is talking, of course, about this waiting – this longing for the kingdom of God...the breaking-in of God’s reign. "Watch for it" Jesus says. "Be on the alert. Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit."

<sup>57</sup> "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? <sup>58</sup> **Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case,** or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. <sup>59</sup> I tell you; you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."

**13** No sooner had Jesus issued this challenge than some in the crowd stepped forward. "Don't say we cannot read the times. How about that terrible incident in the temple, the one where Pilate's police slaughtered some innocent worshipers from Galilee?"

<sup>2</sup> "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Jesus asks.

<sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> "that isn't a sign. And don't bother bringing up the tragic case where the tower of Siloam collapsed, killing 18 people," he added. "That is not the kind of sign I mean either."

<sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

You see, the people thought that surely God would see the people’s plight and respond with a savior when Pilate killed the Galileans while they were worshipping – thus committing murder and contaminating the sacrificial offerings they were giving.

And where was God when the tower fell and killed a bunch of people? Where is God? How bad will it get before God sends us a savior?

"You haven’t a clue," Jesus replied, "about how to interpret the present time."

Like Russia occupying Ukraine, and Israel occupying Palestine, Rome occupied Galilee, Samaria and Judah and the people then, as many in our world do now, felt as though maybe God had forgotten them...or maybe this was the precursor to a great battle where good would conquer evil and God would be victorious, and the people of God would – finally – be at peace.

“You haven’t a clue," Jesus replied, "about how to interpret the present time."

To help the crowds understand even more, Jesus told them a parable:

<sup>6</sup>"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard;  
and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

<sup>7</sup> So he said to the gardener,  
'See here!

For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none.  
Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'

The owner of the vineyard in Jesus' story has every right to ask that the barren tree be removed. As a matter of fact, as a businessperson, he would be foolish to let barren trees take up valuable production space.

<sup>8</sup> But the gardener replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

<sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, well and good;  
but if not, you can cut it down.'"

What is the sign of God’s Kingdom Coming?

Look closely else you will miss it.

"let’s nurture it, care for it and give it one more year." Let’s see if it can be redeemed...let’s give it one more chance – just one more chance.

*That’s it.* That is the sign of the times. This is the clue to God’s Kingdom Come! Not the earthquakes, and tsunamis, not wars or rumors of war, but instead the gracious and patient hand that reaches out to halt the ax. This is the clue to God’s Kingdom Come... the voice that says, "Let’s give it another go."

That’s not likely what the crowd wanted to hear. The parable didn’t make much sense to those looking for a strong military messiah who would lead the people to a rebellion against Rome – like Deborah and Barak did back in Judges. Surely many in the crowd would remember – even closer in their history – nay lifetime – the Hasmonaean dynasty – the short-lived Jewish kingdom won from the Greeks by Jewish

rebels (the Maccabees) only to end 123 years later in 37 BCE by the Roman empire installing Herod, a Roman Jew, as king.

No, for a people living under a repressive regime “lets give it another try” is likely not what the crowd wanted to hear. But it is what Jesus was giving. Look says Jesus. What is at issue isn’t that God wasn’t with the people who died so tragically. What is at issue isn’t that God isn’t attending or hearing the cries of the people. What is at issue isn’t that bad things are an ominous sign of things to come. No...these events happen. The world is sinful and bad things happen all the time and God loves us through all these horrible events. What is at issue is that the kingdom of God is happening already, and we don’t see it because we are overcome by the situations around us.

The traditional way of looking at this is that God is the owner, Jesus is the gardener, and we are the trees who ought to be making luscious fruit...but are having trouble.

The owner says, “Let’s chop it down!” (Let’s punish them for doing bad things...let them perish due to their sin through natural events or political ones). I can remember hearing this explanation for why Haiti had the terrible earthquake...or why Katrina hit New Orleans so badly.

The gardener says, “Give it another chance” Jesus offers his life for the sake of saving the tree. The tree has to decide whether or not it will accept the gardener’s work – if it doesn’t...well, it’ll get chopped down.

That’s the traditional way of looking at this parable...If so, then what Jesus is saying is that these events – Pilate killing the Galileans during worship and the tower falling and killing many – are linked to the people’s sin...and if you don’t repent, then the same thing will happen to you.

Hm. There’s a reason why this is the traditional way of looking at the parable. It certainly is a valid way of interpreting it – and certainly there is a time for repentance. I love the image of Christ as the gardener – tending and nurturing me.

Let’s look at the parable again in a new light; in the light of what we already know about its context. What if God is not the vineyard owner, and Jesus is not the gardener, and we aren’t the trees who ought to produce luscious fruit but are having trouble doing so.

What if Jesus meant that WE were to be the gardeners. What if WE, like the gardener in the story, provide, instead of an ax, a cool drink of refreshing water to the struggling tree. How would THIS change the meaning of the parable? How would this help the crowd to understand the signs of the times? What would change about how WE interpret the coming of God’s kingdom?

Do we repent in fear because “the end is nigh?” Or do we nurture and water and encourage each other regardless of endings – because that is what we are called to do.

Let me give you an example of what this could look like.

Pastoral theologian, Seward Hiltner, once told a story about a state-run mental hospital where truly hopeless cases were relegated to a ward in the dingy back wing of the institution.

The psychiatrists and other medical staff avoided this back wing, making only the bare minimum of calls and writing off the patients there as irredeemable.

But then, a women's group from a local church began, as a missions project, to visit the patients in this hospital. No one bothered to tell them that the patients in the back wing were abandoned cases, so they visited them regularly, bringing flowers, fresh baked cookies, prayer, cheerfulness, and kindness.

Before too 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 just a church being the best church it could be. At another level, these women responded to the signs of the times. They saw what was happening – the despair, the pain, the feelings of being forgotten, and they said NO. No-one under their watch was going to suffer for lack of friendship and love. And they did this – why? For the sake of and love for Christ.

Do you see? The ax is coming. Yes, the end is nigh...it's been nigh since before Jesus...Yes there is war – there has always been war – this war is no different than others – thousands of innocents die on the whim of a few in their lofty towers. Look! The axe is coming, and we have a choice.

Who are we in this dangerous world? Are we nurturers of the lost and the broken, the wounded, the hurting, the forgotten, or do we write them off?

Are we wielders of the ax? Do we write-off – snub or judge others as unworthy because they have less or are different than us – or are broken and we deem them unworthy?

Do we reject them because they can never pay us back? Do we abandon the cause because we don't always see the fruit of our labour that we so desperately want to see?

Back then when Jesus was talking to the crowds and now today, Jesus is reminding us that the time is NOW. If we would look at the world around us – if we would open our eyes to see – to truly see the world around us then we would see that NOW is the time to hold out our hand and stop the ax. We would see that the world needs God's living water now. And we have the bucket and the ladle.

See. God's kingdom is evident in our responses. In how we react to the signs of the times in what we choose to do, and the reasons why we do it. The signs of God's kingdom is love.