

## Signs and Times

### *The times.*

The prophet Isaiah gives voice to the widespread sentiment of his day, a time people agreed was confusing, when so many deeds were motivated by a self-interest that sullied religion and perverted politics, when even the memory of happy days was fading, drying up and blowing away: “There is *no one* who *calls on your name*, God; no one who attempts to take hold of you...” (cf., Isaiah 64:1-9).

In our life and times, though, we could say, with some justification, that the problem is *too many people are calling on God*—a God they fashion for their own purposes as the source for their particular version of Christianity. You probably do not know Pastor Jaffers but you likely remember his remark that a Mormon should not be President, that only a good Christian should be allowed to lead the nation. What the media did not cover was his explanation of what a good Christian will do as President: regard all mosques in America as potential terror cells, repeal any legislation of the past 40 years that involves a woman’s decision-making power over her body, and revoke all same-sex marriage and civil union statutes because homosexuality is a health hazard. Perhaps these are not so surprising to us. The first reflects a persisting phobia in certain parts of our society about Islam; the others echo the cultural divide of our age. But most puzzling was his closing comment that a good Christian President would see to the end of all government-sponsored programs of assistance to the poor. I am not certain which Bible Pastor Jaffers is reading when telling people this is what God desires. However, I am more certain that our days are marked and marred when anyone forgets the closing lines of today’s Isaiah lesson:

“O Lord, you are our Father—we are the clay, you are the potter” (Isaiah 64:8). We are the work of God’s hands; it is not the other way around!

Advent is a time in our lives when we are called on to repent of this tendency to get it backwards, of our trying to make God in *our* own image, a god filled with our ideas, our presumption and prejudice. It is why with the psalmist we sing, “Restore us, O God of hosts, show the light of *your* countenance, and we shall be saved” (80:3). The light of God’s countenance shines into our darkness through the One who is to come; the Christ whom we await.

### ***The signs.***

“In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (Mark 13:24f). These words were spoken, more or less, last Sunday on *60 Minutes* by Christine LaGarde, the new head of the International Monetary Fund. She was referring to the economic signs of the times and how an extended period of no growth would expand unemployment and lead to widespread social unrest. If this were to happen, she concluded, “it would not be a pretty picture”. Indeed. Even the fear of such crisis makes people all the more restive. So, also, Jesus said, “When you see these things taking place, you know that ‘the Son of Man coming in the clouds’ is near, at the very gates” (Mark 13:25-27). What does this mean? That things are getting so bad that the end is near? Is the Mayan Calendar 2012 prediction accurate after all? Well, just as Mayan scholars are saying people are misunderstanding the so-called prediction because the ancient Mayans were not referencing the world’s end but rather the cycle of an ending time and a new beginning, so too do scripture scholars call on us to take a closer look. Of

the signs of the times, Jesus does not say the end of the world is near but rather that He is near, at the very gates. “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

Advent—Christ is so near. Be on the watch; keep awake. The ways in which this world’s counting of time and reading of indicators creates a trajectory for our lives and an orbit for society and culture is a planet and atmosphere being fast approached by the Son of Man. “Coming in clouds”—hard to pinpoint but sure to come—is the passing of our days, surpassed by the possibilities of the One who is coming. Thus, people of faith are watchful for the signs of these openings in our times. Not fearful, defensive and accusatory but watchful, hopeful and participatory. It’s not about who to blame, who to get rid of, for what has gone wrong but rather how to prepare the way such that all are included in the new things about to take place.

### ***Signs and Times.***

Read the Gospels Pastor Jaffers; hear the Word one and *all*: God strengthens us for these changing times, giving us spiritual gifts each and every day during this Advent calendar of waiting and expectation. God is faithful (1 Corinthians 1:3-9), the master potter shaping us according to divine specifications. We are *all* the work of God’s hands—*all* of us. So Isaiah says on our behalf: “Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember our iniquity forever. Now consider, we are *all* your people” (Isaiah 64:9). And Christ says to those who seek not only the signs but to live in these changing times faithfully, “What I say to you, I say to all: Keep awake” (Mark 13:37).

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