

TEXT: Luke 21:25-36
THEME: There will be signs
SUBJECT: Hope
TITLE: Read the Tree Leaves

First Sunday of Advent
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Messiah Moravian
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Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow Nation guided his people through the deep crisis brought on by the invasion of the white man. Shortly before his death in 1932, he said to his biographer: "When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."

"Nothing happened." The Crow remained alive after the buffalo went away, but their lives had no place in their own history. They lost hope.

Luke is writing to people who have lost the Temple, the heart of their religious, social and political life as a nation. Their hearts have fallen to the ground and they cannot lift them up.

Titus placed four Roman legions, 60,000 legionaries, around Jerusalem. On the ninth of Ab, the same day the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem more than five-hundred years earlier, Titus gave the Tenth legion the order to attack. What followed was the kind of experience that gives rise to apocalyptic literature like Luke chapter 21.

Passover pilgrims trapped for months in the city had been reduced to starvation and plagued by disease, fanaticism, and derangement. Gangs roamed in search of food. Prisoners and defectors were crucified. When the soldiers discovered that some of the residents were swallowing their treasures in hope of retrieving them later, they gutted their captives.

Six thousand women and children huddled together in expectation of a miraculous deliverance, were burned alive by the legionaries. They executed the surviving priests in the Temple. The walls were torn down, and the great stones filled the valley between the temple and the city.

No wonder Luke talks of alarm, foreboding and fear. The end of the Temple, the destruction of Jerusalem, he assures them, is not the end of the world. Mark, writing ten to fifteen years before Luke, believed the end of Jerusalem was the end of the world. Luke knows life goes on.

To find life again, the Crow needed to find a "radical hope." Plenty Coups was guided by visions he had at age 11. In one vision he saw buffalo covering the land, but they suddenly disappeared and were replaced by cow-like creatures. In another vision he saw himself as an old man settled near water at the base of the Arrowhead mountains. In another vision he saw the forest blown over by the force of a great wind, with one tree yet standing, the one that is home to the chickadee, believed by the Crow to be wise about the future.

Plenty Coups read these visions as signs of things to come. Other leaders listened to him and the Crow began trying new ways of doing things. They cooperated with the white man, taking advantage of the education provided. Compared to other western tribes, the Crow survived well in the new age.

Jesus seems to think reading the signs of the times is as easy as reading the tree leaves. When the trees begin to bud, summer is near. When unmistakable signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars appear, the end is near.

Jesus' confidence appears misplaced. These unmistakable signs have been mistakenly read for centuries. Hal Lindsey wrote *The Late Great Planet Earth* back when I was in college, meticulously reading the signs of the times and declaring . . . well, if he had read the signs correctly we wouldn't be here this morning.

Read the signs of just this week: birds falling from the sky onto a beach in Florida, convulsing and dying. Dolphins washing ashore in Florida, dying. A dead whale in Indonesia found to have over 1,000 pieces of plastic in its stomach.

Many scientists are reading the tree leaves and shouting at the top of their lungs, warning us of impending doom if we do not change our ways. These scientist are the prophets of our time, and are being dismissed as were the prophets of old.

About 90% of all people who have ever lived struggled every day to keep the household alive against daily threat of hunger, disease, accidents and violence. The benefits of modernity have induced in us a kind of chronic low-grade confusion about what is really important in life. Comfort and convenience have seduced us into believing life should be easy, and hid from us the cost to the poor, to our health and well being, to the environment, to the planet itself.

It is difficult to say anything about the future, even more difficult say anything about the ultimate future of the whole world. But that is what Luke is doing. He is not talking about the end of the Temple nor the end of the buffalo, but an end that will come upon all who live on the face of the earth.

Luke knows the great temptation is to despair. Why not eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we shall die. Despair is the easy way out; it is giving in and giving up. Given what the eye can see, despair is a powerful and persuasive temptation.

Hope lifts up its head and sees what the eye cannot. Hope is difficult. Hope struggles. Hope acts. Hope is a good habit by which we move forward toward a future worthy of our lives, even if we never live to see it. Hope is vigilant. Hope prays for strength to survive. Hope holds its ground.