

## Pay Attention!

Nashville UCC, December 2, 2018

So, what zodiac sign are you? That question is more than just a line that you can use to pick up good-looking ladies in a bar. Many people think that the stars determine our character! If you were born around this time of the year, for example, you're probably a Sagittarius: open-minded and loving, but a bit blunt with others. And, of course, you need to read your daily horoscope so that you're working *with* the stars instead of *against* them. Now, if you're smiling at what you consider to be harmless nonsense, remember that lots of people really believe that the heavens determine our destiny. We are fascinated by the possibility that what happens *up there* has an effect on us *down here!* But our interest in astrology pales in comparison with the attention that people gave the stars in the time of Jesus. They were convinced that the gods made their actions known to human beings through the movements of the stars and planets! The heavens were alive with activity that we could interpret if we paid attention to it. Van Gogh has captured that activity in his painting *Starry Night*. It fairly bursts with color and movement! Those are the stars that we watch for clues about our future, and even the future of our world.

Near the end of Luke's gospel (21:25-28, 34-36), Jesus describes heavenly activity; and it's not a happy scene at all. The movement of the stars in the heavens predict disasters on the earth. The sea roars and foams, and the stars themselves are tossed about as the entire universe is shaken and turned upside down like a cosmic snow globe. In this snow globe, though, we are the ones who are thrown hither and yon like snowflakes! And what is the reason for all this commotion? Why, it's a sign that God himself is coming to set things right in the world that he created but that has gone badly astray. So, what does Jesus tell us to do in response to all this chaos? Should we run and hide in a fortress with a collection of AK47s and a year's worth of canned food and bottled water? Not at all! "Lift up your heads," Jesus says, "because your redemption is drawing near!" Far from being victims of all these cosmic disasters, we can rejoice because God is about to rescue us from all the suffering that the world has imposed on us.

I don't know about you, but I surely see the kind of chaos that Luke describes. Oh, the stars may be fairly secure in the heavens; but we live with chaos on this earth all the time. Hurricanes and tornadoes and wildfires are only part of it. That chaos invades our personal lives, too, like termites that eat away at the foundation of the home that we had thought was secure. When the checkbook

has shown a negative balance for weeks; when the doctor comes into the room where you are waiting and says, “I’m afraid the news isn’t good;” when the voice on the other end of the telephone says, “I’m sorry, there’s been an accident...” Those are the times when the stars fall from the sky, and our world is shaken like a snow globe. At those times, the chaos is so deep that we almost drown in it. At those times, we can’t count on much of anything, and certainly not the worldly powers that caused all that chaos in the first place!

But those are the very times, Luke declares, when we can rejoice, because the Messiah is about to arrive. When our world is in turmoil and there seems to be nothing that we can rely on, we can bet the farm on the fact that the Messiah is coming. Of course, we don’t know when he is coming; so Jesus tells us to pay attention! Watch for signs that God is on the way! Don’t lose sleep worrying; don’t drown your troubles in booze; and don’t run after things that really don’t matter like money or possessions or status! If you don’t keep your eyes open for signs, Jesus says, you’ll miss what really *does* matter! But when we *do* pay attention... those are the times when we can see that God has already begun to creep into our world wielding the power of love. The Messiah’s new world of love and justice is springing up around us even in the midst of the chaos! Arundhati Roy affirms that “Another world is not only possible; she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

Now, the signs of God’s coming aren’t always obvious. There are no neon signs in the sky announcing, “I’m on the way!” and signed “God.” But wherever we see love, charity, compassion, unselfishness, and hope, we catch glimpses of the God who is creeping in among us. Those glimpses are sometimes very hard to see. But the Kingdom of God won’t arrive with trumpets and cymbals. It will creep in among us like a baby born in the night. If you are quiet, you can even hear that baby breathing – soft baby breaths of God’s Spirit that will one day fill the hearts of everyone on this earth!

God is coming to be with us! The one who created us – the one who created this whole world – is on the way to set it right! So don’t be afraid when chaos surrounds us! It’s not the sign of the end of the world! It’s the sign of the beginning!