

## “Signs of Christ’s Coming: A Fig Tree Sprouts Leaves”

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Let’s turn back the clock, start with a football story. This was a big football weekend. Fans (or not), hang with me for a moment.

The year was 1990. The quarterback was Jeff Hostetler, playing with the New York Giants. It was his seventh season as a back-up quarterback. At that point in his career, he had thrown less than two hundred passes, none of which had any significance (whatsoever) on the outcome of the games in which he had played.

In his eighth season, midway through the year, he finally got his chance. The starting quarterback, Phil Simms, went down with an injury and coach Bill Parcells looked to his back-up and said, “Alright, Jeff, it’s all yours.” With that, he ran onto the field and led his team to victory, not only in that game, but in each of the remaining games of the season, as well as in Super Bowl XXV against the Buffalo Bills.

But that’s not where the story stops. During those seven years as a back-up, Hostetler had thrown thousands of passes during practice; ran countless drills with his running backs and wide receivers. He lifted tons of weights, did hundreds of push-ups and sit-ups, jogged many miles, and ran numerous wind sprints. He literally spent hundreds of hours with his playbook, studying not only his own offense, but the defenses of the opposing teams. When Coach Parcells finally turned to him and said, “It’s all yours,” he was more than ready.

Today we’re at the beginning of the season known as Advent. Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time of getting ready. The word Advent literally means “to come to.” During these next few weeks, we focus on the coming of Christ into our world. It’s a time to get ready for the coming of Jesus.

As a result, we’ll be reading passages that look back on some of the Old Testament prophecies, pointing to that day when God’s promises would be fulfilled with the birth of Christ, as well as ones that (look forward) to his second coming, when the world (as we know it) will come to an end. Until then, (and that’s what this season is about), we wait for the day to happen. We wait for the fullness and the fulfillment of God’s promises. And while we wait, we get ready.

The theme we’ve chosen (this year) is one that ties in with the passages we’ll be reading. “Signs of Christ’s Coming.” (That’s going to be our focus.) We’re going to be talking about some of the signs, looking at and considering what those signs might mean for us.

As long as we’re (turning back the clock) today, I don’t know how many of you would remember (years ago) some of the road signs. Along many of the two-lane roads (especially), there would often be found a series of five small red signs with white letters. The first four, would give (the reader) the words to a humorous poem. The fifth was always reserved for the name of the sponsor.

The sponsor was “Burma-Shave.” Do you remember? (It was quite the deal.) For those of you too young to remember, let me give you a few examples. Try to picture it: a series of five signs, spaced evenly apart, driving along the road.

(Here’s the first.) Drove Too Long / Driver Snoozing / What Happened Next / It’s Not Amusing. Burma-Shave. (Sort of goofy.)

(Here’s another.) Don’t lose your head / To gain a minute / You need your head / Your brains are it. Burma-Shave.

(How about this.) If a gift / You must choose / Give him one / He’ll like to use. Burma-Shave.

Alright, last one. (This is my favorite.) In Cupid’s little / Bag of Tricks / Here’s the one / That clicks with chicks. Burma-Shave.

“Signs of Christ’s Coming.” Let’s talk for a few moments about signs. Signs are important. They’re there for a reason. They keep us on track; help us to know where we’re going and what to follow.

Imagine trying to navigate without (a GPS) or without signs. Signs keep us aware of our surroundings. They give direction. They provide warning. To ignore them can be risky and (at times) even costly.

Again, turn back to 1941. (Many of you remember.) Two American soldiers observe something unusual on their radar. They report it to their supervisor, a rather young, inexperienced Lieutenant.

It was a peaceful Sunday morning, nobody else around. This young Lieutenant, thinking what they had seen on the radar was (nothing more) than planes on maneuvers from California, (said), “Don’t worry about it. It’s really nothing.” Turned out it was really something. They should have worried about it.

What those two soldiers had seen were the first signs of 353 planes on their way to Pearl Harbor. They reached there approximately two hours later on December 7, 1941. A very critical sign was missed. And a tragic, devastating attack took place. Signs are important.

Our gospel lesson begins like this: (Jesus says), “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time (he says), they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. (And yet), when these things begin to take place, (Jesus says), stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Now, there are a lot of things about the (end times) we don’t know. We don’t know (for example) when it’s going to happen. (Not even Jesus knew.) “Only the Father knows” is what Jesus said.

We don’t know (either) where we’re at in the timeline. Are we halfway there? Are we 75% along the way? Is it the eleventh hour? Is it almost midnight? Is it going to happen when we’re still alive? (We don’t know.)

And neither do we know how it’s going to happen. Our text gives us some signs, but we don’t know if these are meant to be taken literally or figuratively? Will the heavenly bodies actually be shaken? Will the sun and moon and stars literally become signs of warning from God? Or will that time simply be a time of chaos, a time of anguish, a time of anxiety and fear and apprehension of the unknown? There is a lot about the end times we don’t know.

What we do know is that it can happen at any time; because at all times, this world is less than what it was intended to be. Those signs (about which Jesus was talking) are not just ones that apply to the last days, but that apply to today, and to almost every day.

The early apostles, (with all of their suffering) in those early years, were convinced that Jesus was coming back soon. During the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther was convinced that it could happen at almost any time. Many thought it happen during the time of Hitler. Many thought it would happen during Viet Nam. With all that’s going on (these days) in the Middle East, I wouldn’t be surprised if it happened in our lifetimes. I really wouldn’t.

At the same time, I would be surprised if it’s still a long way off. It doesn’t matter. (It certainly could be.) We’re not supposed to know. What we are supposed to know is what matters.

“When these things begin to take place (Jesus says), stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Now, I don’t know about you, but (to me) that doesn’t sound like God’s trying to frighten us. He’s trying to give us hope. He doesn’t say, “Duck! Run for cover!” He says, “Stand up and lift up your heads . . . for the day of your salvation is getting close.”

Tony Campolo talks about how (when he was growing up), preachers used to try to (scare the kids) by warning them that Jesus could appear at any time, and woe if Jesus turned up and found them (in of all places) at a movie theater! He talks about how he grew up with a constant fear, every time he went to the movies, that Jesus would return during the double-feature and he’d end up missing the end of the movie.

Now, there’s nothing wrong with using fear as a motivator. At times, I’ve done it myself. As a parent, as a pastor, at times, it’s appropriate. There is a healthy fear as we consider what God is able to do and what’s going to (someday) happen in the future. Maybe we’re not afraid enough? Maybe not!

At the same time, especially during this season of Advent, if you know Jesus, if you know what he wants (for you) and what he’s done (for you), the thought of him coming at any time, whether at Christmas or at the end of time, ought to be an occasion (not for being afraid), but for rejoicing. In only a few weeks, we’ll be singing that old favorite, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come.” That’s what Jesus wants us to have and to know.

It’s like the story one of my professors told during seminary. At the time, there was no gymnasium on the campus, so the seminarians would play basketball in one of the local schools. The janitor, an old man with white hair, would wait patiently until the students had finished playing. While he was waiting, he would (often times) be found reading his Bible.

One day one of the seminarians went up to him and asked, “What are you reading?” The janitor replied, “The Book of Revelation.” Surprised by what he (had heard), the seminarian asked, “The Book of Revelation? Do you understand what it means?” The janitor replied, “Oh yes, I understand what it means.” The seminarian said, “You understand it? What does it mean?” The janitor replied, “What it means is that Jesus is going to win.”

Isn't that great! Isn't that the truth! That's all that finally matters to those who know him. Jesus is going to win. That's good news. No one loves us like Jesus loves us. No one knows us like Jesus knows us. “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Jesus went on to tell a parable. “Look at the fig tree (he said), and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the Kingdom of God is near.”

Can't you picture it? When we see the world falling apart, it's nothing more than a reminder that God will one day pull it all together. When we see the world filled with fear, we'll know that the kingdom of God is not far off.

“The lion will lie down with the lamb.” (That's what the Bible tells us.) “The snake will be found next to a child. No more crying. No more suffering and pain. No one will live in fear.” That's what's behind the promise. That's what awaits us when the time comes.

At the same time (and for the same reasons), we need to pay attention to the signs while we're still here. And not just those signs we see that point to the end, but to those signs that come from God that point to what's happening right now.

Signs from God can show in almost any area of life. How many couples have ignored signs (early in their marriage) that things in their relationship need work, and nothing happens? How many parents have ignored signs from their children, that what they need is not more things, but more time? And if ignored, (with time), it's too late.

God's warning signs are not just pointing to the end, but to here and to now, and to things in our lives we need to face. If you're seeing the signs, (whatever they are), don't close your eyes to what you're seeing. If you're watching the signs, (wherever you see them), don't turn a blind eye to what you see.

Jesus says, “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation (that means wastefulness), and drunkenness (that means anything that dulls our judgment and makes us unable to discern), and the anxieties of life.” (You don't need me to tell you what that means.) It's all around us.

When that happens, (Jesus says), the end will come like a snare or a trap. When we're not ready, it'll happen. When we least expect it, that's when it'll take place.

Instead (Jesus says), “always be on watch, pray that you'll be able to escape, and (when that day comes) be ready to stand before the Son of Man.”

Like a child waiting for Christmas, make sure you're doing the things in your life you need to do to be ready. Like a couple awaiting the birth of their first child, do what you can now to be fully prepared when that day comes. Like a family waiting for the return of a loved one after receiving word that he (or she) is safe and headed home, always be on watch.

“Signs' of Christ's Coming.” I began (today) with a story. Let me close with a story. It's a story about a man named Robby Robbins, an Air Force pilot during the first Iraq war. After his 300th mission, he was surprised to be given permission to immediately pull his crew together and fly his plane home. Surprised as they were, it didn't long for them to head out.

These young military men flew across the ocean to Massachusetts and then had a long drive to western Pennsylvania. They drove all night to get there, but never with a second thought.

When his buddies dropped Robbins off at his driveway, just after sun-up, there was a big banner across the garage: “Welcome Home Daddy! We're glad you're here!” How did they know? No one had called, and the crew themselves hadn't expected to leave so quickly. What gave it away?

Robbins says that when he walked into the house, the kids, half dressed for school, screamed, “Daddy! Daddy! You're home!” His wife (Susan) came running down the hall. He said she looked terrific –her hair fixed, make-up on, and a bright yellow dress. “How did you know?” he asked. “What was the sign?” She said, “We didn't know. There weren't any signs...All we knew is that one day it would happen, and when it happened, (we knew) you'd try to surprise us, so we were ready (she said) every day.”

That (my friends) is to be our approach during Advent. This is a season for waiting. It's the season of signs. And so "Be on guard (Jesus says), always be on watch." Your redemption is coming. God's promises are all true. It is going to happen. Be sure to be ready. Amen.