

Interpreting the Signs of the Times

This is a sermon I offered again at my own Eighth Day Faith Community on September 11, 2005, the fourth anniversary of 9/11 and shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans down, revealing, for the first time to some Americans, the face of American poverty and the inadequacy of societal response. The question I explore is What is the nature of God's judgment? How does one make sense of an Old Testament prophet like Jeremiah in today's world?

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away. Mt 16:1-4

We live in a time of extraordinary danger and extraordinary possibility—a time, even, of hope.

But to claim those possibilities and that hope requires reading the signs of the times. And that is difficult when the only sign that's given is the sign of Jonah: the demand for repentance, for turning around and changing our ways.

When Jesus calls it a "wicked and adulterous generation," he's not talking about sexual immorality. As you know, in the Bible the term "adultery" is a frequent metaphor for unfaithfulness to God; the entire book of Hosea, for instance, plays with that metaphor. A generation is adulterous when it turns its back on the poor, falls prey to an idolatry like consumerism, desecrates God's natural creation, destroys the lives of innocent people, relies on military power, and so on. Ours is a wicked and adulterous generation.

We've talked in this community about the perils of Empire long before the term came into common parlance. We've talked together about our exile as Christians living in such a culture—when the nation's values and practices become so strange that we sense we've lost our home, lost a common language, a set of common values. And we've talked together about the inevitable coming judgment upon our country ... which might be:

- ecological devastation
- nuclear proliferation
- competition for scarce resources
- violent kickback from our failure to relieve the world's enormous, utterly preventable suffering
- more potent chemical and biological weapons, even nanotechnology, placing weapons of mass destruction into the hands of small groups, and so on.

What was more difficult—for me, anyway—to see was how quickly the United States would lose its economic, political, and military power and fall from its status as superpower.

But that day is fast upon us. And the signs of the coming disruption have been with us for some time. Let's look at some of them.

Now before I get into this, Marja suggested I warn you that—as usual for me, I guess—this is going to be heavy on the economic and political, and it's going to be depressing ... before we get to the possibility and to the hope.

The idolatry of American consumerism has done unimaginable damage to the earth and its people. But few noticed how heavily we've been borrowing from other countries in order to finance our consumption. This isn't just the enormous private indebtedness of individuals due to credit cards, which is a very real but separate problem. It's our national indebtedness to the rest of the world.

For those of you who aren't economists, give me a few minutes to explain—in shorthand—the nature and probable consequences of the ballooning American balance of trade deficit. If I buy something from abroad and import it into the country, it must be paid for. But my paying for (say) my foreign car—even with cash from my savings—doesn't solve the balance of trade problem. The economic reality of international trade is that money going out of the country must be balanced by money coming in. So my car must also be paid for by my dollars returning to the United States, which can happen in one of two basic ways. Ideally, someone in a foreign country buys something here of equal value, thus sending the money back and balancing my import with an export from somewhere else in our country.

Failing that, the second possibility is that someone from another country must invest an equal amount of money here: buy US Treasury bonds, loan money to an American company, invest in real estate or something like that. However this is done, though, this is money that is essentially loaned to our country and must eventually be paid back.

For a number of years now, American exports have fallen way below our imports, so we've had to use the second option: borrowing the money from foreigners. This is the "balance of trade deficit" you hear about, and it's currently running almost \$2 billion a day; that is, the United States has to borrow \$2 billion a day to finance our addiction to consumption. And the number is growing.

Our ballooning federal deficit just adds to the problem. We have to borrow that money, too, and much of it comes from foreign investors, so that total American borrowing from the rest of the world reaches somewhere in the neighborhood of a trillion dollars a year.

For years the prevailing economic wisdom around the world has been that the US economy was strong enough to take on this massive debt and remain a good investment. Otherwise, people wouldn't have continued to loan us the money or would have demanded much higher interest payments to cover their risk. Just this week, US Treasury officials pointed to foreign investments as a sign of the strength of our economy. In recent years, however, the borrowing hasn't been financing investment in manufacturing or other business; it's been financing consumption itself. And, it should be obvious, this borrowing can't go on forever, despite what certain "experts" contend. (Remember the confident projections that the dot.com bubble could also persist indefinitely; it didn't really make sense.) At some point, investors get nervous about all that American debt. Am I going to be able to get my money back?

Over the past three years, the value of the dollar has fallen precipitously. Three years ago, for instance, the dollar was worth 1 euro and 14 pennies. This past Friday it was worth less than 76 pennies. This means that Europeans (and others) who have invested in the US have found the value of their investment worth only 2/3 of what they expected.

One thing that has kept the value of the dollar propped up has been that other countries have been using it as a reserve currency since the gold standard was dropped 40 years ago. Countries trade in dollars, so they have to have a significant reserve of them to back their own currency. Recently, however, Russia announced that it would trade its oil in euros, rather than dollars. This past week South Korea sent shudders through the international finance

community by signaling that it would soon start using other currencies as part of its reserve. Twenty-four hours later, after a sharp international reaction, they withdrew the signal.

But the handwriting is on the wall.

Several things might happen because of the uncontrolled trade deficit and federal borrowing. At best, the value of the dollar will continue to slide gradually until the prices of our exports expressed in other currencies drop low enough that we regain a balance in trade. Exactly what the price of this for us will be is hard to estimate. One expert has suggested that our standard of living will have to decline—at the very least—by about 20%.

At worst, investors and countries holding dollars in reserve could get so nervous about losing the value of their investments that they start trying to sell them off as quickly as they can, possibly triggering a collapse of the world financial system and much hardship in the US.

In other words, the United States is quickly losing its economic power. We're no longer in a position to offer a Marshall Plan to anybody. We don't have the money. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with their enormous expenditures, of course, are hastening us to this end.

This loss of economic power combined with our obstinate unilateralism of the past several years and a foreign policy that is stunningly unpopular around the world have led to a substantial loss of political power within the world community. The failure of Europe to support our Iraq policy even two years after the war, the recent independent European negotiations with Iran in the face of the US desire for a hard-line stance, and the rapidly tightening economic and political bonds between Russia and Europe are just three manifestations of this loss of political influence in the world.

And if you think back to the wars that the US has started over the last fifty years, they've all been against third-rate (or less) military powers, and even then we've not done very well. Our military has proved quite ineffective in creating stability, for instance, in Iraq or Afghanistan. This isn't because our military lacks courageous well-trained soldiers, firepower, or the latest technology. It's because blatant military power is no longer very effective at doing anything except wiping out the enemy. It turns out that you can't dominate another country any more—even a small one—purely by military force. Much more nuanced pressure is required.

The world is quite aware that the great American superpower is bogged down in a country of 24 million people with no modern weaponry ... and bankrupting itself in the process.

It'll be very interesting to watch what happens to Iran's nuclear intentions. Iran is a very different instance from Iraq. It's possible that some extreme neocons in the administration will carry the day and we'll actually attack Iran as Ray McGovern and others have suggested, which will be one kind of terrible disaster. A second possibility is that Iran will just defy us and continue its nuclear program, which, in addition to adding one more politically unstable member to the nuclear club, will be a further political disaster for the US because of the implication that we're really helpless to impose our will. A third possibility is that the European Union will successfully negotiate a solution with Iran leaving the United States on the sidelines—a solution to be hoped for but also a clear example of our weakening position in the world.

This has been an overly long economic and political lecture for a sermon, especially from one who is neither economist nor political scientist. But if we are—as Karl Barth first said—to study our scripture with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, we need to be able to discern the signs of the times.

I mentioned at the beginning that this was a time not only of great danger but also of great possibility. Those possibilities are to be found precisely within the danger.

The United States is quickly losing its superpower status and economic power, and this will probably continue. The consequent economic contraction, of course, is unlikely to be distributed fairly, so we can expect to see increasing inequality among Americans, with more of the middle class in economic freefall. (One little statistic I recently read. Average after-tax wages for the lower 95% of Americans have remained pretty much flat over the last thirty years, while productivity [the amount produced per hour] has increased by about 40%. The implication is that the entire increase in US productivity has gone to the wealthiest 5% in the country.) As Christians we need to prepare ourselves for a very different world, a world in which God's call will be to a much more radical lifestyle of simplicity and sharing. We'll be called upon to interpret for others what's happening and show them the connections between our adultery and the judgment. It won't be a popular message, but it will be an extraordinary opportunity to embody and speak out for Kingdom values in a world that will desperately need them.

How should we prepare ourselves to respond to whatever upheaval is coming? Let me suggest a few possibilities. There's still a chance—albeit a very small one—for the sign of

Jonah. Nineveh repented and it's still possible that we might. That won't happen, however, unless we recapture our democracy and allow the American people the possibility of repentance. There are two enormous stumbling blocks to recapturing our democracy.

One is the money involved in politics that so deeply corrupts the process. Improbable as it is in the present climate, the only solution I can imagine is such thorough campaign finance reform that all campaigns are financed by public money. The powerful, of course, will fight such a change with all their might.

The other stumbling block is the control of the media. The media have become—far too often—vehicles of government propaganda and of thought control. Unless people are truly informed about the political realities and their implications, they can't exert their political power. Our president, for instance, has refused to push for mandatory limits on carbon dioxide emissions because, he says, it'll hurt our economy. But if all US voters understood the full implications of global warming and of our government's policies, I can't believe that the Administration's position could stand. But without media independent of government and powerful financial interests, citizens will remain uninformed and the real voice of the people won't be heard.

I'm not sure how the media are to be changed, ultimately probably only through governmental restrictions on media size and encouragement of alternative media. Certainly the first step is for each of us to become aware of how the media control our thinking and disseminate government and corporate propaganda. There's certainly some hope and great possibility in the Internet as an alternative medium.

Taking such action to change the political situation is important, but the likelihood of it succeeding is small. I suspect we're too far gone. So others of us must be preparing to see the hope and possibility the inevitable coming judgment. I'd like to suggest two different kinds of response. One I've already alluded to. We must become deeply aware of the connections between the coming judgment and our adultery and learn to educate others by making those connections at the proper moment. We have the opportunity to teach the deep practicality of the Sermon on the Mount within political relationships. Perhaps its time for the establishment of a mission similar to World Peacemakers that would educate others in the churches about Empire and the coming judgment.

A terrorist attack on the US such as 9/11, for instance, was utterly predictable years before

2001. How might our response have been different if significant groups of people within the church had understood the connections between our cultural, economic, and political footprint in the world and the rise of terrorism? What if churches across the country had realized that something like it was bound to happen? Might the American response have been different?

Similarly in the coming disruption. Can we be ready to explain the connections between our consumerism and the coming economic realities, between our foreign policy and our loss of political power in the world? If the catastrophe that first hits us is ecological, can we be ready to make the connections to our disobedience and idolatry? Can we make the connections between our consumerism, the need to control the oil in the Middle East, and our military adventurism? Can we lead the way back to a simplicity of lifestyle that will be utterly necessary in the coming order?

We have the opportunity to become once again a prophetic voice against the culture, like the German confessing church or the American Civil Rights movement, speaking spiritual values into a world that initially can't even understand them. World Peacemakers showed the churches how to work for peace. The people of Jesus now have a similar opportunity: As things disintegrate we can begin to show the deep practicality of simplicity, kindness, care for the poor, justice, and so on ... because the coming society won't function without them.

In fact, it's during times of extreme turmoil that changes in the political system—unimaginable just a few years before—can take place. The New Deal couldn't possibly have been imagined in the 1920s, and it wouldn't have happened except for the disruption of the Depression. If we're ready for the coming disruption and understand the multiple connections, there'll be room for major changes in our system, making it more obedient to God's purposes.

The second response that we might make comes under the heading of what Jonathan Schell has called "parallel structures." During the 1970s and 1980s in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, small groups of activists realized that there was no hope of beating the Soviet Union at its own game. There was no chance of an actual revolution or takeover. The government had all the guns. So, in different ways in each of the three countries, the people started building organizational structures "parallel to" the governmental structures. These were not just oppositional movements, although some were. They were essentially structures to do what the government should have been doing but wasn't. The Polish Solidarity was probably the best known of these structures, but there were hundreds of others, large and small that provided for widows and orphans, made community political decisions, ran co-ops or other marginal businesses. The very existence of these parallel structures, of course, was a challenge to the state but not a direct one, so most were allowed to continue. Not only did these structures

provide the people with some hope for how life might be lived, they were then ready to take over when the Soviet empire began collapsing in the late 1980s. They were all ready to go, thus avoiding chaos and giving the vulnerable new societies some roots.

It turns out that we've had such parallel structures here in the Church of the Saviour for years. We've called them "missions," and we've mostly understood them as charities. But what if we began to see them and treat them as honest-to-goodness parallel structures—small examples of how society might organize itself? What would happen if we began to see our missions as direct challenges to the society and began writing our newsletters from that perspective or banding together to see how else we might prepare for the coming disruption?

Joseph's House, for instance, is not only a place that cares for men with AIDS. It's also an alternative community, an alternative way of being with one another that—in its model of love and forgiveness—directly challenges the values of the culture. Our newsletters seek to demonstrate those values to our supporters. Are there ways that we can be more explicit about that and thus create of ourselves political institutions, that might, for instance, mobilize supporters in one political purpose or another?

Jubilee Jobs, for another example, has added to its activities a political living wage campaign, agitating for legislative change that would guarantee living wages to the people it places in jobs.

Eighth Day Church has been deliberately exploring its place in the Empire and how our preaching, our liturgy, our welcoming, our political activity might manifest God's Kingdom.

I admit that I don't yet know exactly what this will look like, but I sense enormous possibilities for networking our institutions that are powerfully rooted in their respective communities and creating of them political movements that directly challenge the social order while preparing for the coming disruption.

Our society and our country are shifting before our eyes. If we can read the signs of the times, there are enormous possibilities for offering the reign of God—with its understanding of care for the poor, love, forgiveness, nonviolence, direct action, and so on—to this broken nation. We can't avoid the danger but neither should we shun the opportunity.