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*Alert Waiting Now*

Stand up, raise your heads. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down.” Be alert at all times.

May you increase and abound and multiply and excel and overflow in love for one another and for all.

Especially when it seems like everything is pushing us to retreat, lay low, put our heads down, help, save, comfort, and defend ourselves. Stay a safe distance from this world that looks to be changing, morphing, ending.

I like driving, and I tend to think of myself as a calm and confident person behind the wheel. Ask those who drive with me often and I think they would agree, while adding one caveat. I can get distracted. I like to know and to see what is going on around me. To soak it all in. I’m drawn to what is happening in the cities and towns and neighborhoods we are driving through. There are so many interesting things to see along the way. And often I get to drive with people who are great conversationalists. Last week we had a friend visiting from out of town. There was a lot to catch up on, so I was wrapt in conversation and missed my exit. Sign and all.

Whether it is astrology, ancient calendar-dating, certain ways of reading apocalyptic literature in popular culture, or, or, or. It is easy to become distracted and fascinated by things in the sky or elsewhere. Signs.

Books fill shelves with titles like, *The End of the World According to Jesus* and *The End Times in Chronological Order*.

It is tempting to look for signs everywhere that the culmination of history is just around the bend inviting our gaze as we hunker down. Turn inward.

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” Climate change, wars, political unrest, social fracturing, growing wealth disparities, globalization, pandemics, artificial intelligence, heightened anxiety, our own broken relationships and despair.

When these things *begin* to take place your redemption is drawing near. In this time of increasing darkness we herald the coming of the Dawn from on High. Paradoxical signs are plenty. The fullness of God enters the fulness of this world.

Just as in Mark's version of the little apocalypse that we heard a couple weeks ago, people throughout history have read their own times into this text, assuming that Christ's *final* coming would be imminite. It is no wonder the earliest Christian communities like those In Thessalonica assumed it would happen in their lifetimes. History rhymes, sometimes eerily so. Things often look bleak in a world filled with so much sin and death. Hope is routinely an endangered species on this island home with our propensity to perpetuate systems that preserve the way things have always been. We disappoint others and ourselves. Random suffering populates the landscape.

Throughout it all we are nothing if not distracted. It is no surprise people write books these days with titles like *Born Digital*; the story of a distracted generation. Whether our eyes drift up, inward, or just glaze over with information overload there is a lot to look at and decipher.

When I'm driving, I can be so mesmerized by what is going on in the car or off to the side that I can miss what is right in front of me. signs and all.

Lutheran theologian Vitor Whestelle talks about end times not only in terms of linear time but in terms of space. There are places where the world ends. Christ promises to come at the end, and also in every one of those moments and experiences where the end has already come. For displaced peoples, for those we label as marginalized or less fortunate, and in our fragile bodies. In threshold, ruptured, places of rending. In our lostness. Wherever we are haunted by despair. In the people and places we keep hidden away-- even locked in our own hearts. That is where the seed of God's new creation begins to take root-- under all of the broken signs of the opposite. Late at night/early in the morning, at winter's midnight. There is God's gracious word outlasting all others. Finding you and setting you free. In sight. Sound. Touch. Taste. That word will never tire of coming to you and raising you again.

Keep following the signs— In Jerimiah and Luke we are instructed to look to the ground. A righteous branch. A fig tree. Signs that were once buried, spring up from the soil. On this first Sunday of the church year as on every Sunday-- all markers lead to the tree of the cross that has become the tree of life. The cursed place that becomes the source of blessings for all who long for new life. The spot of utter God forsakenness has become the clearest revelation of God's unending love for this world. Hidden in plain sight- there is God at work bringing life out of every death. The fig tree that nourishes and shelters us, the branch strong enough for all creation to find their place. Forgiveness, mercy, justice all flow from here. Our true north.

How do we stay alert? On guard? Not distracted? Look straight ahead through the cross to your neighbor in front of you. Increase, abound, multiply, excel, overflow in love for one another and for all just as God first loved you. Singularly justified by faith we are liberated to be singularly devoted to our neighbors no matter the hour. So caught up in serving others that we don't even know what time it is anymore, only who we are and who we belong to. The God who has arrived and is always on the way.