

Signs of Preparation (Luke 21:25-36)

Bill Hybels, the founder of the Willow Creek Church, tells this story about the time he played on a park district football team. Hybels writes:

“During the warm-up before our first game, I learned that I would be playing middle linebacker on the defensive unit. That was fine with me. My favorite professional athlete is Mike Singletary, All-pro middle linebacker for the Chicago Bears.

When it was time for the defense to take the field, I stood in my middle-linebacker position, determined to play with the same intensity and effectiveness I’d seen so often in Mike.

The opposing offensive unit approached the line to run their first play. Mimicking Mike, I crouched low and stared intently at the quarterback, readying myself to explode into the middle of the action in typical Singletary style. The battle raged and reality struck with a vengeance. Using a simple head fake, the quarterback sent me in the opposite direction of the play, and the offense gained fifteen yards.

So went the rest of the game. By the fourth quarter I came to a brilliant conclusion. If I wanted to play football like Mike Singletary, I would have to do more than try to mimic his on-the-field actions. I would have to get behind the

scenes and practice like he practiced. I would have to lift weights and run laps like he did. I would have to memorize plays and study films as he did. If I wanted his success *on the field*, I would have to pursue his discipline *off the field*. Preparation and discipline are no less important in the field of Christian living.”¹

Hybels’ story helps us see the need for discipline and preparation in “the field of Christian living.” You don’t have to be a Chicago Bear fan to remember the intensity with which Mike Singletary played at the middle-linebacker position. His eyes were always wide open as he searched the offensive unit. His preparation helped him to read the offensive plays – the signs given up by the quarterback, the running back, the receivers and the line men. Interpreting these signs he could anticipate the quarterback’s moves and be prepared to make the play. Mike Singletary was deliberate about reading the signs given up by the offensive. He was also disciplined and patient, waiting for just the right time to move toward the ball. This was his secret on and off the field. Please pray with me.

Creator God, you have given us signs to read and interpret. Signs that tell us to anticipate the changing times, signs that help

¹ *Honest to God* by Bill and Lynne Hybels. (Zondervan Publishing House, copyright © 1990).

us to prepare for the coming of your kingdom here on earth. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and your word proclaimed. Motivate us to prepare for the coming of your Son, not just once again this year at Christmas, but for all times. In his precious name we pray. Amen.

In this life there are many things we rely upon without really thinking about them. Often times the things we take for granted play an authentic role in our lives. There is much we take for granted in this life. Like signs, for instance. We take signs for granted. Sometimes we pay attention to them without appreciating the role they play in our lives. Sometimes we ignore those same signs and end up wandering around lost and unprepared for life.

Signs give us direction, telling us what to do and what not to do. "Turn left here." "No left turn allowed." "Stop." "Yield." "One way – do not enter." Signs also help us on our way by giving us general information and guidance. "No services for the next fifty miles." "Rest stop ahead one mile." "More than four billion hamburgers sold." "Going out of business." If you don't think we take signs for granted just visit a foreign country sometime where language is a barrier.

And there are other signs we tend to take for granted. In the gospel lesson this morning Jesus is explaining the importance of interpreting the signs of the coming kingdom and our need to understand those signs and to be prepared.

He told [the disciples] a story. "Look at a fig tree. Any tree for

that matter. When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you that summer is right around the corner. The same here – when you see these things happen, you know God's kingdom is about here. Don't brush this off: I'm not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too – these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won't wear out." [Luke 21:29-33
The Message]

Some signs aren't particularly subtle, like the Popeye's Chicken sign on Neltnor. That sign is so not subtle as to be obnoxious! And then sometimes we just don't believe the signs we are given. I would be a good example of not believing the signs placed in my path from time to time. It usually happens to me this time of year as the first "big" snow fall of the season is predicted. Still stuck in Indian summer mode, I watch the weather on the evening news. When that first prediction shows up – that first sign of an impending snow storm – I have difficulty believing Tom Skilling. I tend to not rely on Tom and all those other all-to-often incorrect predictors of weather.

And it's not just that I choose not to believe the forecast, I tend to ignore other signs, as well. Signs like people on the news scurrying to pick up supplies, replacing worn out snow shovels, getting old snow blowers in shape or buying new ones. One year I watched on the news as an obviously jubilant man doing a fist-pump for the camera as he walked out of a Home Depot with the last snow blower available. Sometimes those signs include reports of people stocking up on food, water and supplies to weather the

storm. I see people reading and interpreting Tom Skilling's weather signs and preparing for the storm to come.

But not me! No. I am still stuck in the warmer weather thinking there will be plenty of time to get ready for winter. I guess I just don't believe it will happen or that the storm won't be as bad as Tom Skilling says. Then it happens, waking up in the morning to drifts of a foot or more in my driveway. I fail to interpret and heed the signs and so I also fail to prepare for the coming of winter in Illinois which I know is inevitable!

More often than not, I pay the price for not reading and interpreting the signs, for not heeding the signs and preparing. Bill Hybels paid the price by not reading and interpreting the signs and preparing. All of us, at one time or another pay the price for not reading and interpreting the signs given to us – for not heeding the warnings presented to us.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. You will remember from last week that this is the beginning of the New Year – the Christian Year. It is our tradition as Christians to begin the New Year by preparing for the events to come. The first event is, of course, the celebration of the Incarnation – the day the Word became flesh –the birth of Jesus Christ – the Redeemer

Our preparation began in earnest yesterday as you can see. And it will continue after worship this morning as we gather for a meal and complete the decorating of the church. Perhaps many of you have already begun your traditional preparations at home. But these preparations are only symbolic and superficial. The preparation Jesus is speaking of has nothing to do with decorations, buying presents, and giving

holiday parties. The preparation Jesus is speaking of goes to the heart of preparing for the coming of the kingdom of God. In his wisdom, Jesus is telling us through the gospel to:

"... be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it's going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don't go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that's coming" [Luke 21:34-36 *The Message*]

The preparation Jesus is speaking of requires discipline and practice. Just like Mike Singletary prepared for his middle linebacker position through discipline and practice. Through discipline and practice we become familiar with the signs of the times. We no longer take signs for granted but read them and interpret their meaning for our lives. Just like Mike Singletary was able to read the signs of the offensive players, allowing him to make the big plays.

So how do we prepare for the coming of the kingdom? Probably not the same way Mike Singletary prepared to play football – by running laps, lifting weights, and studying game films. Our preparation comes through three important elements of spiritual practice – prayer, study, and Christian action.

Imagine a three legged stool. Prayer, study, and Christian action each

represent one leg of the stool. Our preparation depends upon balance in our lives and in our spiritual practices. If any one of these three elements is lacking or missing, our lives are unbalanced like the stool is unbalanced. When one leg of the stool is shorter than the other two, it becomes unbalanced and we fall down. The same is true of our spiritual lives, we fall short of preparing to live in the kingdom.

Prayer is important to understanding the signs of the times. We ask for awareness and enlightenment to be able to pay better attention to what is going on around us. Pray to make Christ the center of our lives so that we become less concerned about our needs and more concerned about the needs of others.

We need to study the scriptures to better understand the kingdom of God and what it means to say it is coming to earth. God still speaks to us through the biblical text. If we aren't paying attention to reading the text and attempting to discern it's meaning for our lives today it's difficult hear what God might be saying.

Then it's important to translate our prayer and study into action. Being prepared for the coming of the kingdom means living in the kingdom now! We spoke last week about living with one foot in God's kingdom and the other foot in our own earthly kingdoms. Living fully in the kingdom of God is like Mike Singletary preparing on and off the football field. It means living the Christian life with Jesus at the center of your life in all that you do – on or off the field.

It's important to each of us in this season to understand what God is calling us to prepare for. God had a purpose in the Incarnation – in

becoming fully human and fully divine in Christ Jesus on that first Christmas. It was important to God to experience what it means to be human – to experience our joys, our sorrows, our delights, our fears, and our pain. After processing human joy, sorrow, delight, fear, and pain, God's other purpose was to give us a role model to follow so that we will be prepared when the kingdom comes to earth in all it's fullness. Jesus is that role model.

Whether you ease into the season or burst upon it with a bang, take time to read the signs of the times. Take time to prepare by praying, studying the scriptures, and putting your prayer and study into action. Read the signs, interpret the signs, heed the signs and remember that Jesus is the reason for this holiday season as we continue to prepare for his coming.