

WHAT'S THE WEATHER FORECAST?

I have a certain routine that I follow pretty much every morning when I wake up. First, I lay in bed for a moment to gather my thoughts and think about what lies ahead for me today. Is it going to be a good day or a challenging day? And, as Red Skelton once joked, if I don't smell flowers and see candles burning, I figure that's a good sign.

Next, I do my stretches. I always seem to wake up with aching muscles and stiff joints, and stretching for five minutes or so before I rise from bed helps me loosen up.

Finally, I ask my Amazon assistant, Alexa, "Alexa, what's the weather today?" I like to know what the weather forecast is, because it helps me get ready for the day. If Alexa says it's going to be sunny and 95 degrees out, I'll wear a light shirt and make sure to turn on the air conditioner in my office as soon as I get there. And if she says it's going to rain, I'll pull out my umbrella and put on my black rubber overshoes—I think I may be the only guy in Scarborough who wears galoshes—before I leave the house, to prevent my feet from getting wet and my shoes from getting soaked through and ruined.

Knowing what the weather will be can be very important. In fact, your life could actually depend on it because if there's a marine advisory and the forecast is predicting a powerful storm with gale force winds, it would be dangerous if you didn't hear that warning and decided to take a boat out on the open water. And if severe thunderstorms are expected later on, that's good to know if you're planning to spend the day at the golf course, chasing that little white ball around, because I understand that it's pretty common for golfers to be hit by lightning. Maybe because a golf club makes a pretty good lightning rod.

When our church had a Karaoke and S'mores night in the parking lot a little over a week ago, the weather was a factor. A group of us was enjoying some wonderful fellowship, food and music when all of a sudden these very ominous looking dark clouds started rolling in. The signs in the sky were obvious. The weather was about to turn ugly. So we all scrambled around madly to pick up the

chairs, sound system and fire pit as fast as we could and headed for shelter. And sure enough, a few minutes later the skies opened up and the rain came pouring down in buckets. Fortunately we were alert enough that we could see what was coming.

Jesus knew something about staying alert and keeping your eyes open for signs in the sky. He said, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It’s going to rain;’ and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat;’ and it happens.”

Yes, with satellites orbiting the earth, keeping an eye on things, and other new and ever-improving scientific technology to help us, we do pretty well predicting what the weather is going to be, at least for a few days into the future. We can see the storms coming before they arrive and do their damage. But there are signs happening in the earth and sea and sky that seem to be pointing to other, even more dangerous kinds of storms. Jesus called these the signs “of this present time.” By that he meant signs that foretold the coming of God’s final judgment and the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth. On that day, Jesus said, on what has been called “The Day of the Lord,” we will find ourselves standing humbly before our Creator to give an account of our lives.

Although Jesus made it very clear that only God, and no one else, not even he himself, knew when this divine Day of Judgment was going to arrive, he said there would be signs warning us that the time was drawing near. Just as satellites in space and signs in the sky can help us predict severe, tumultuous weather, there would be indications on earth and in heaven to warn us that the time of God’s judgment of the world and establishment of God’s realm was coming, and it was inevitable.

As Christians, we’ve been told what those signs would be—things such as wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and other natural disasters, famines and plagues. Do those things sound familiar at all to you?

They should, because they’re happening now, in our present time. Now, I want to make it clear that I’m not saying the Day of Judgment is definitely at hand and will be here by the end of today or tomorrow or next week. I’m not smart enough or arrogant enough to try to predict something that prophets and shysters have been predicting for the past two thousand years. And, as we know, none of them have turned out to be right.

But what I can say with absolute certainty is there are signs—and to me they’re very clear and perilous signs—that some kind of day of judgment could possibly be near. And even if you don’t believe there’s going to be a single moment when history draws to a close and every person who has ever lived is

going to be judged in God's divine courtroom, at the end of the day we still have to face, as individual human beings and as a collective human race, the consequences of our actions, choices and decisions.

To be honest, sometimes I can't help but think that maybe now is a good time for Christ to return and save us from ourselves, before it's too late. There are moments when I'm so distraught and disgusted with the way things are, I pray that it will happen sooner rather than later. Come now, Lord Jesus. Please. But God has His own timetable for the coming day of the Lord, and I'm not privy to it. No human being is. So what do we do?

We do the only things we can; the only things that are in our power to do: as God's people and Christ's followers we strive to overcome the evil of the world with good; we watch for the signs around us and try to interpret the present time; and we live our lives as though the Day of the Lord might arrive at any time, so we will be ready when it does come, and however it comes.

When Jesus walked the earth and proclaimed to all who would listen that the coming of God's Kingdom was imminent, most people around him closed their ears to it. The same way that people do today. Jesus was astonished and dismayed that, while those in his audience were quite good at local weather forecasts, very few of them were willing or able to see signs of God's impending day of judgment to come. Were they blind to what was going on right in front of them? Or was it that they simply didn't care?

The signs they were missing were things like the brutal Roman occupation of their homeland, and the oppressive regime of King Herod; the wealthy and corrupt high priests in Jerusalem, and the arrogance and self-serving agendas of the Pharisees.

And in the middle of it all was a prophet and teacher who announced to all who had ears to hear that in him God's Kingdom had arrived, and who went around healing the sick and raising the dead and casting out demons to show people that the message he was proclaiming came from God. But even with those signs, very few people were willing or able to put two and two together and conclude that this was in fact the moment Israel had been waiting and hoping for throughout its long, tortured history. The Messiah had finally come in Jesus, and Jesus was letting that be known, but he found himself saying, "Hello? Is anybody home?"

Ever since Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Christian church has been waiting with great anticipation and watching for and expecting, Christ to return at any time to judge the world and rule over the nations. Of course, that hasn't occurred. As more and more years went by and Jesus' second coming didn't

happen, the church began to interpret passages like the one we read this morning in Luke's Gospel as being a reminder that each new generation was responsible for watching for signs in their own present time, through the behavior of people, governments, and nations and their policies, and interpret them accordingly. As the British theologian N.T. Wright wrote, "If the kingdom of God is to come on earth as it is in heaven, part of the prophetic role of the church is to understand the events on earth and to seek to address them with the message of heaven."

So, what are the events happening here on earth? What's the weather forecast for our present time?

Well, if our smart phones were able to predict such a thing, I think an alert would definitely pop up, because to me it looks like there's severe weather in the forecast for us. Think about the numerous mass shootings that have killed so many innocent people in places that were always considered sacrosanct and perfectly safe, like schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, movie theaters, WalMarts, coming out of a nightspot to go home, walking down a crowded city street, and on and on.

Think about climate change, the callousness, greed, selfishness and apathy that's causing it, and how it's resulting in a steadily warming earth, rapidly melting glaciers, rising sea levels, dying oceans, animal species going extinct every day, future food shortages and other threats to the very survival of humankind and to planet earth itself.

Think about the growing geopolitical tensions between nations that could lead to a horrific, deadly war and, possibly, nuclear annihilation. I don't think I'm being dramatic at all, because the news reported only a few weeks ago that there was an accident in Russia and a nuclear missile exploded, which sent high levels of radiation into the atmosphere.

Think about the rising number of hateful, often violent behavior due to prejudice and racism; homophobia; and government overreach to arrest and expel asylum seekers without due process.

Think about the ugly discourse going on in our nation between people, races, religions and politicians that I guess has become the new normal, and how it has greatly eroded respect and dignity between human beings and prevents people from working together to solve some very serious problems.

Think about all those things, and ask yourself, "What's the weather forecast? How are we to interpret this present time?"

The Jesus we heard speak in this morning's Gospel lesson isn't the Jesus we're used to hearing. This Jesus isn't easy to listen to. He's angry and seriously annoyed. He's a real "Debbie Downer." We would certainly rather hear from

Jesus the Good shepherd, seeking the lost sheep and carrying them home on his back.

We would rather hear the words of the compassionate Jesus who healed the sick, and reached out to the poor and the hopeless and offered them the encouraging message that they are loved and cared about by God, and that in God's realm, they who are now last shall be first.

We would prefer to learn at the feet of the Jesus who teaches that the poor in spirit will inherit the kingdom of heaven; those who mourn will be comforted; and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.

That's not the Jesus who is speaking to us right now. The Jesus talking to us today is like those irritating but necessary emergency broadcast system warnings that come over the TV or radio, telling us that a threat to our wellbeing exists and we need to be aware of it and take precautions. But are we listening to what that Jesus is saying? Are we paying attention to him? Is our Lord's warning getting through to us?

My friends, we're wise enough to check the weather report when there's a chance that threatening weather is coming. We know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky and realize that a storm is on the horizon. But do we know how to interpret this present time? Can we discern the hand of God waving to us and warning us in the destructive things that are going on in our world? Can we hear the Word of the Lord speaking to us through the ominous signs that are right here in front of our eyes?

The Lord is giving us fair warning. I hope and pray that we will heed what he is saying and make the changes that are needed to make God's kingdom known here on earth. Amen.