

*"YET ANOTHER CHANCE"*  
(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

**Scripture Lesson:-** Luke 13: 1 – 9

// Sunday, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1938.

The evening prayer service in a little country church in the hills of Georgia was in full swing when a man named Sam – a member of the congregation who lived down the road – burst into the service. Trembling with fear and excitement, he blurted out the news that "Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships!  
Some of 'em have already landed in New Jersey!"

The preacher paused in mid-sentence; the congregation stared blankly at their friend, the messenger. "I swear!" he stammered. "I heard it on the radio. It must be true!"

What Sam had heard, of course, was Orson Welles's now infamous Mercury Theatre radio production *War of the Worlds*, but no one in the congregation was aware of that then.

For all they knew, the world outside was coming to a flaming end.

The little evening congregation looked anxiously at the preacher, but for the first time in his ministry he was at a loss for words. Never before had one of his sermons been disrupted by an invasion from outer space.

Finally one of the oldest members of the congregation – a weathered farmer of modest education – stood up, gripped the pew in front of him with his large, calloused hands, and said, "I 'speck what Sam says ain't completely true.

But if it is true, it may be the beginning of the end, and we're in the right place here in this church. I say we get goin' on some heavy-duty prayin'."

And so they did.

(Adapted from Thomas G. Long, *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2001, p. 11) //

Signs of the end? We in the United Church don't talk much about that sort of thing, do we?

Instead of being panicked, we smile at the idea of Martians choosing to land near Hoboken.

And yet the old farmer does touch something tender within us when he decides that it is better to be in church praising God, than running around the cow pasture firing a shotgun into the sky.

Have you noticed that when life threatens to overwhelm us, when we face the traumatic and the unmanageable, we too have been known to seek refuge in our faith – engage in some "heavy-duty prayin'".

// Remember the Sunday after those September 11<sup>th</sup> planes swooped out of the true blue dream of sky and brought us face to face with terror? Our churches were full that Sunday.

People we had never seen before were sitting in our pews. //

// I experienced the same just recently, the Sunday after the earth rumbled under Haiti on January 12<sup>th</sup>.

I was in Pennsylvania, and accompanied a friend to his church – to Christ Church Episcopal in Stroudsburg. On that poignant Sunday, sitting in the pew just behind me was a young black couple from Haiti – their first time worshipping at Christ Church.

"We had to come," the young man told me after the service. "We have not heard from our

parents since the earthquake. This is where we need to be today." //

Whenever the traumatic and the fearful shatters our lives – whether earthquake, or terrorist threat, or rumour of Martians landing in New Jersey, when it feels like “the end of the world,” it is usually to the sources of our faith that we turn.

As we sang last week in our Taize service, “In God alone my soul can find rest and peace...”  
When all else is coming loose, “in God alone...”

Time and time again in our life-journey we have found that to be true.

The gospel named by the lectionary for this morning – the first nine verses of Luke 13 – continues a discussion Jesus is having with his followers about reading the signs of the times.

This is one of those occasions when there is an edge to the tone of the teaching, when he seems a bit harsh to us.

“You haven’t a clue,” he says, “about how to interpret the present time.

You are far better at meteorology than theology.

You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky,  
but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

It is at this point that some in the crowd step forward.

“Don’t say we cannot read the times,” they respond defensively.

“How about that terrible incident in the temple, the one where Pilate’s police slaughtered some innocent worshippers from Galilee and desecrated our sacrifices with their blood? How about that?”

“No,” says Jesus. “That is not a sign. And don’t bother bringing up that tragic case where the tower of Siloam collapsed, killing 18 people. That is not the kind of sign I mean either.”

So what, then, are the signs of God’s new reality?

Jesus is talking, of course, about noticing signs of God’s action in our world.

“God’s new reality will come like a thief in the night,” he says. “Watch for it.  
Be on the alert. Be dressed for action, and have your lamps lit.”

And then to sharpen our vision he tells a parable about a vineyard owner who was frustrated by a barren fruit tree on his land. “Because it does not produce anything we can use we had better cut it down,” says the owner.

“Sir,” pleads the gardener, “let me care for it, put some compost around it, water it more carefully. Please, sir, give it yet another chance, just one more year.”

“Now *that*,” says Jesus, “*that* is the sign of God’s time breaking into our world.

None of these other things are signs of God’s time -- not invaders from outer space,  
not earthquakes or tsunamis, not a government budget dressed up in new words,  
not wars and rumours of war, not even conspiracy theories about Sydney Crosby’s  
missing gloves and stick...

No, the breaking in of God’s reign instead has to do with the caring, patient hand that reaches out to halt the axe; it has to do with the gracious gesture that suspends those who would give up on the barren and the broken...

God’s reign has to do with the merciful voice that says, “Let us give this

hopeless case yet another chance..."

Such are signs of God's kingdom breaking into our world...

The parable is a delightful illustration of the way of God – the gospel of the second chance, and the third, and the fourth. It is what Jesus perceives his own ministry to be:-

"bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives; setting free those who are downtrodden, and proclaiming the year of God's favour... (Lk 4: 18, 19)

Yet another chance.... and another... and another...

"Just one more year," says the gardener.

// "Christian life is made up of thousands of beginnings," Brother Roger, the founder of Taize was fond of saying. //

Well that is the heartbeat of the gospel, it seems to me.

Just when your life seems to be at a dead end, you may have another.

"All things new..." is the good news.

A relationship with Christ is like a fresh beginning, a clean slate, a new birth, a resurrection...

"Now *that* is the sign of God's era breaking in among us," says Jesus.

Every time we help someone make a fresh start in their lives,

every caring word that brings healing and hope to another,

every hint of prejudice and hatred we defeat with our acceptance and our love,

every time forgiveness releases us, or another, from the shackles of the past,

every new beginning is a sign of God's realm coming alive in our midst.

Now that is a gift – and it is also a responsibility.

// And our friend John Bell helps us make the connection between the ministry of new life which Jesus yearns to offer the world, and our own opportunity within that.

John Bell has written a text that is one of my favourites – the hymn with which we will close our service this morning:-

*Jesus Christ is calling, calling in the streets,*

*'Who will join my journey? I will guide their feet.'*

*Listen, Lord Jesus, let my fears be few.*

*Walk one step before me; I will follow you.* (Voices United, hymn # 117) //

Those who dare to follow the way of Jesus, which is to say you and me -- we help to usher in God's realm on earth...

// Way back in the mists of time when I was a fresh-faced student studying at Queen's Theological College, we spent a lot of time in our Pastoral Theology seminar with the text books of Seward Hiltner.

Each Wednesday afternoon we would gather around the table to discuss one of Dr. Hiltner's case studies. For some reason, one of those studies has lingered in my memory.

The setting was a state-run psychiatric hospital – one of those sterile, institutional places where the truly hopeless cases were relegated to a back ward.

These were the forgotten ones – the people everyone else avoided.

Psychiatrists and other medical staff made only the bare minimum of calls, simply

writing off these patients as unsalvageable.

Somehow the plight of these patients came to the attention of a women's group from a local church.

They began, as a matter of compassion, to visit this back ward.

No one bothered to tell them that these patients were abandoned cases, so these women visited regularly; they brought flowers, home-made cookies, a cheery demeanor; often there was a time of prayer and hymn singing...

Much to everyone's surprise, before long some of the patients began to respond.

They would smile when the women entered the ward.

They began to interact, however tentatively.

A few eventually became healthy enough to move to other wards. //

Now at one level, this was merely a church group doing what church groups feel called to do.

But at another level, perhaps it was a sign of God's time... It was not giving up....

It was expressing caring love for those others had written off as hopeless.

It was tending the barren tree -

offering yet another chance, in the name of the One who makes all things new...

*"In the bulb there is a flower...*

*in the seed an apple tree..."* (Voices United, Hymn # 703)

...Signs of God's time... Amen!

[Hymn 703 "In the bulb there is a flower..."]