

Will the Real Jesus Stand Up?

Are we in the middle of the “birthpangs” Jesus talks about? Is nation rising against nation? Extreme weather, more outbreaks of wars must be signs of what Jesus is talking about. Down through the ages so-called prophets have stood on street corners ranting and shouting about the end of the world. They took Jesus very seriously at his word here today. Wars, famine and earthquakes came and went. We are still here. So who are we to believe? Who do we listen to?

We actually get a clue from Jesus himself. In true Jesus fashion, he leaves the disciples’ questions unanswered. He goes on to say that “no one knows the day or the time.” Still conservative literalists will insist that the text does give us information to go on. How can we forget the end-of-the-world predictions of just last year? We are still here.

One clue to figuring all this out is to remember is that apocalyptic images are meant to urge the listeners to beware – watch the signs around us. A more appropriate urging would be to “keep awake” as Jesus says later. Keep awake, in the way the disciples must, when Jesus is off praying. Keep awake, like the servants in the empty home when the master is away. We are to keep awake, keep watch – not so much for bad things to happen, instead – for what God is doing in the world. Jesus’ saying, “Beware,” is clueing us in to wait for God. Because God is active in the world and we have to figure out our role. We have to watch for where we can step in because of what we know of Jesus.

Another clue is Jesus’ warning to beware of those who would lead you astray. But how do we know we are getting bad “intel?”

One thing to note is that many Christians believe the question posed by the disciples is the central question of the Christian faith: “When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to happen?” This is the question of people who have a hard time living with shades of grey. Just the facts, please. I want hard and fast answers so I know what to look for. They miss the point that we are to be on the lookout all the time for “God-happening.” It’s not about waiting. It’s about awareness.

I imagine our role in all this is like someone on a relay team, standing on our toes vigilant for the hand-off the baton. Listening for the flying feet, watching for the raised hand, feeling the smack of the hand and we are off! It’s our turn to carry out what God would have us do, whenever, wherever we are.

Another thing we have to remember is that Jesus taught on a number of subjects: from divorce to loving your neighbor. If, as people of faith, we take Jesus seriously, we need to consider how Jesus acted and responded in all the situations he faced. Jesus is the lens through which we read the rest of the Bible AND live our lives. Jesus is the benchmark we hold up to any prophet or preacher out there who would spout hate, burn Qu’rans, or call another human being an abomination.

The signs of the “real” Jesus can be measured in the way we act in the face of injustice, threats, or challenge. When Jesus was falsely accused he stood firm: “You say so.” Turning the other cheek is not a trite saying but an act of compassion.

When Jesus was accused of breaking the law on the Sabbath, he asked, “If your ox was trapped in a ditch, would you not step in and save it?” indicating that helping a person in need has no rules. You just do it.

Intervening when a woman would have been stoned to death, his words, “Any of you among us without sin may cast the first stone,” stopped everyone dead in their tracks.

Don’t worry. Pray always. Be merciful. Keep awake. Love always, even your enemies. Offer grace along with a cup of cold water.

Touching a leper, a blind man, a lame beggar, a bleeding woman, a dead man, a boy with epilepsy – the list goes on. Religious law forbade it. People were aghast. Jesus did it anyway because he was always about bringing life and bringing hope.

That is the Real Jesus. And that is the point. The story isn’t always about us. It is about how we bring life and hope to others.

This is the season of gratitude, of thankfulness. Be aware of the blessings in life. Cultivate a sense of mindfulness in all you do. And keep awake, keep alert to where God is beckoning you to be active in God’s work. Then YOU will be the real Jesus that is coming into the world.

Amen.