

“The Weather Forecast”

I don’t know about you, but I’m amazed at the accuracy of modern weather forecasting! It used to be people would joke about the local weather reports – how inaccurate they were. Not so much anymore. Predict wind this coming Wednesday? Turns out to be a windy day! Rain tonight? Usually the rain comes.

We’ve come a long way with the advent of weather satellites and computerized weather projections. Today’s weather reporting is a far cry from 40 or 50 years ago, where a meteorologist would step outside the building, see that it was raining, and say, “It’s going to be a rainy day!”

Some of us like to do some amateur weather forecasting: “Red sky in the morning, sailors’ warning; red sky at night...(what) sailors’ delight.” Or, a ring around the moon means – what – rainy day coming! Or, if Uncle Freddy’s right knee starts to bother him, rain is on its way!

Then, there’s this one: If you’re wondering what the temperature is while lounging around the campfire, just listen to the crickets! By counting the number of times a cricket chirps, you can calculate the temperature outside in Fahrenheit. Count the number of times a cricket chirps over a 14 second period, then add 40 to that number, and boom, you’ve got the temperature. You can take a few measurements and use the average to get the most accurate temperature. And, let’s not forget the good old *Farmer’s Almanac*. Never was quite sure what sources they used to predict next year’s weather!

In preparing for this sermon, I went online to check out how weather forecasting developed over the centuries, and it’s pretty interesting. For instance, around 340 B.C., the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote a massive four-volume treatise on weather and weather forecasting. Much of what he said was wrong! But his ideas held sway for centuries, into the 17th century!

Jesus once commented on forecasting the weather. “He also said to the crowds, ‘When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, “It is 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. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?’” (Luke 12:54-56). Jesus is speaking to the crowds, and He says, you know how to predict weather changes – if you see a cloud forming in the western sky, you know it’s going to rain. If you feel a south wind blowing, it’s going to get really hot. But you don’t know “how to interpret the present time.”

What does Jesus mean, you don’t know how to “interpret the present time”? I think Jesus is saying, “You don’t understand what God is doing right now! You don’t get who I am. That I came to forgive and set you free of your sins. To reconcile the world to God – to restore our lost relationship with the Father. That I came to bring in God’s kingdom, a new way of living, marked by love and goodness. That I am the very presence of God in your midst.”

It must have been so hard for Jesus when people simply didn’t recognize who He was or why He came! Yes, as He continued His preaching and teaching and healing) the crowds grew bigger

and bigger! But some just sought Him for what He could do for them: He healed their illnesses. He fed them miraculously. For instance, after He miraculously fed well over 5,000 people by multiplying 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, the crowds followed Him. But He says to them: “I assure you that you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted” (John 6:26). The crowds, for the most part, didn’t understand who He was or why He came.

Neither did His disciples! And this must have hurt Him the most! He poured Himself into the lives of these 12 men - mentoring them, teaching them about this new kingdom of forgiveness and humility and love that He was bringing to the world. And yet they didn’t get it. He told them plain out that He was going to suffer and be put to death at the hands of the religious leaders – that He would be a Messiah who gave up His life for the sins of the world. And yet, even to the end, they thought He came to lead a revolt against Rome, and make Israel a powerful nation again. It was only *after His resurrection* that they could see what God was doing right in front of their eyes!

I can’t help but wonder if Jesus’ words apply today, “You know how to predict the weather with amazing accuracy, but you don’t know how to interpret the present time – what God has done and is doing through Me.”

Advent is meant to be a season of preparation. We prepare to celebrate Jesus’ birth, to ponder again the meaning of His life, as God’s gift to us. Advent is also a time when we remind ourselves that Jesus will come again, at the end of time, in power and glory. And we should be ready at all times for His return.

How many people, do you think, are doing that during these 4 weeks of Advent? Here’s Douglas. Doug is a biology professor at the university. Brilliant mind. Well versed in the latest findings in his field. He’s not particularly religious. He had a brief brush with the church when he was in high school. Got active in a church for a while, but he was turned off by those whose interpretation of the Bible seemed to conflict with what science was teaching him – especially about how creation took place. So, Jesus and church and Christianity will not even be on his radar screen as he prepares for Christmas.

Then there’s Kim. Kim’s a busy wife and mom, a human resources manager at the local plant. She’s a smart lady, knows all the ins and outs of managing personnel in a sizeable business. She’s got 3 kids who are super active in sports, cheerleading, music lessons. Many weekends are spent taking her kids all over creation for baseball and soccer tournaments. Between her job, and taking care of the house, and running a taxi service for her kids’ activities, she has little time for herself. She’s a member of a church, but hasn’t been there for the last few years. Just no time. Her Advent season will focus on just getting everything done that needs to be done before Christmas day arrives.

How about Sean? Sean is a single guy, early 20’s. Graduated from trade school. An up-and-coming service man at a heating-air conditioning firm in the city. Very knowledgeable young

man. Knows all the latest technology about furnaces and air conditioning units. Church? Well, actually, he's never been inside a church. No interest whatsoever, especially since one of his coworkers is an avid churchgoer, but the language this guy uses, some of the shady things he does on the job, and the way he treats some of his coworkers, is a real turnoff. As you would suspect, Sean's plan for the Christmas season is focused on partying and having a good time.

Just an aside. This young man, Sean, is part of a whole generation of young people who have no memory of church, no experience of the church and what it stands for. These 20-somethings might be smart in other things, but not about the church's proclamation of Jesus.

One piece of good news! There have been recent reports of college and university students responding in a positive way to the gospel! At the University of Cincinnati hundreds of students were baptized recently. At Clemson University, thousands of students came together to worship, share testimonies, and participate in baptisms – some baptisms taking place in the back of pickup trucks! At the University of Tennessee, more than 8000 students gathered to lift the name of Jesus, and approximately 500 were baptized.

Jesus said to the crowd, "You can predict the weather, but don't miss what God is doing right now, through Me!"

Matthew's gospel has a similar story about predicting the weather. "The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.' Then he left them and went away" (Matthew 16:1-4).

Pharisees and Sadducees (religious leaders) question Jesus in order to test Him, trick Him. "If you are really someone special sent from God, show us a sign." This wasn't the only time people pressured Him to show some kind of powerful sign.

Have you ever thought how difficult it must have been for Jesus *not* to do something spectacular to silence these critics? I mean, He had all the power in creation to show to them some signs! Here were these religious leaders – questioning Him, testing Him, doubting Him. He could have demonstrated His power by making them blind, or freezing their vocal chords (that would have shut them up). He could have struck them dead! He could have turned them into frogs! Wouldn't that have been funny! A bunch of Pharisees and Sadducees hopping around on the ground! Like in that quirky movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* where the one simple-minded man thinks his friend Pete has been turned into a horny toad!

But Jesus didn't do that! He wasn't about dazzling people with His might! His kingdom was about humility and grace. Changing people and the world with goodness and love.

So, when these religious leaders come to Him and demand that He show them a sign to prove that He was genuinely sent from God, this was Jesus' answer: "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (Matthew 16:3-4). No sign will be given except the sign of Jonah. What was that? It was: *repent!* God sent Jonah to Nineveh to tell them to repent. Turn around. Change. Turn from your sins, and turn to God and His way of living.

The dawning of the kingdom of God, and repentance, are tied together. The proper response to the inbreaking kingdom – this new way of life – is to *repent*. Jesus began His ministry with these words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).

Many of us tend to look on repentance as a negative thing. Oh, the preacher's being so negative. Criticizing. Putting us down. But when people see their shortcomings, and want to change and be a better person, isn't that a good thing?

Savonarola was an Italian political reformer in the 15th century. At the start of his ministry in Florence he noticed an elderly woman who used to come and pray regularly before a statue of the Virgin Mary. One day, Savonarola took an elderly priest aside, who had been serving in the cathedral for many years, and said, "Look how devoted this woman is. She comes every day to offer prayers to the blessed Mother of Jesus. What a marvelous act of faith." But the elderly priest replied: "Don't be deceived by what you see. Many years ago when the sculptor needed a model to pose for this statue of the blessed Mother, he hired a beautiful young woman to sit for him. This devout worshiper you see here every day is that young woman. She is worshiping who she used to be." *She is worshiping who she used to be.* We can be content with the old version of ourself – so much so, that we are reluctant to change.

Think of how much better the world would be: If all *politicians* would repent of their lying, deceiving, strict party allegiance. If all *scammers* who use clever ways to trick us and take our money would stop it. If all of the *mean-spirited, overly critical* people would soften up and be more kind and understanding with people. If all the people in our families who are *dysfunctional* and cause so much turmoil would seek to change and get the help they need. If all of us who pretty *satisfied with who and what we are* would long to be a better person, and a more sincere follower of Jesus.

Repentance – turning from self-centeredness and turning to God, being willing to change to be a better person - what a great way to use the Advent season as a preparation for Christmas!

So, there we have it. Two stories in the Bible where Jesus talks about people forecasting the weather. It's fine to be smart and savvy in certain areas of life. But don't miss what God is doing in the world, sometimes right before our eyes. And don't miss what God has done for all of us in the giving of His Son, our Savior. (Gee, maybe the next time you hear a weather forecast, you'll think of this sermon!).

So, the next time you watch the local weather report on the news, or check the weather on your phone, think of these stories from the gospels.

