

Can you finish these statements?

1. “Red skies in the morning, (*sailor take warning*).”
2. “Red skies at night, (*sailor’s delight*).”

How many of you are meteorologists? How many of you ever took a course in meteorology? Yet, most of us know these things. In the days before Doppler Radar and Storm Search, our ancestors could “read the skies” and other signs:

1. The cows are lying down. That means ... ?
2. Granny’s rheumatism is acting up.
3. Monday I saw my first flock of geese flying south.

Matthew’s gospel reports this confrontation between Jesus and the leaders of the religious establishment.

(MATTHEW 16:1-4 NRSV) The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ² He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ ³ 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. ⁴ An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.”

Whether by Doppler Radar or Aunt Bess’ corns, we’re still pretty good at interpreting the appearance of the sky. We can predict tomorrow’s weather down to a “four degree guarantee!” We’re also pretty good at predicting the stock market, fashion trends, gross profits, and even who’ll win a given football game.

But we frequently miss the obvious—right under our noses. Politicians spend vast amounts of energy, time and resources to destroy, discredit and embarrass political opponents—to the neglect of the country. This has gone on all my life, and probably longer, and we just don’t get it. We say, “It’s just politics.” No. It’s more than that. It’s a sign of the times.

Graphic violence and irresponsible sexuality have taken over every phase of entertainment, from children’s cartoons to music videos; and we just got used to it. It’s estimated that by the time our children reach puberty they will have witnessed more than 1,000 murders on TV, and some of us just don’t get it. The number of children committing violent crime has multiplied several times in recent years; does nobody else see a connection? It’s a sign of the times.

Noted psychiatric researcher Richard Chessick writes, “Today’s children are caught up in the current whirlwind of barbarism.” He describes that “barbarism” like this: “...the breakup of the family, pervasive instability of family life and loss of family as the ideal, loss of extended family, loss of moral values and religious

traditions, a background of affluence with no experience of hard times, inconsistency and insecurity of parents, high mobility and fast transportation, bombardment by television with its primitive sensations, and the general decline of social values and the quality of life in general." Signs of the times.

What's going on? It's interesting to contrast two of the words of Jesus in the text from Matthew: "*You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*" Two different words, both translated, "interpret". From the first word we get our English words, "criticize", "critique", "critical", "crucial." It means literally "to judge"; "to discern" or "to interpret". The second word is, δυναμις, from which we get the English word, "dynamite". The sentence literally reads, "Concerning the face of the sky, you can judge; as to the signs of the times, you are powerless."

Now, I have this well-developed sociological explanation for our sense of powerlessness; but I've a hunch you already know about it from experience. Let me ask: Do you agree that the world is in trouble, with little evidence of an immediate reversal of that situation? And do you feel relatively powerless to do anything about it? Do you trust the government to do anything about it? the judicial system? the police establishment? the educational system?

I want to suggest, "That's good news!", because the reality around us—the signs of the times—places us in position to be open to the leadership of God. *If we can't trust things, people or systems, where else can we turn?*

Now, it's one thing to say we trust in God—to print it on our coins—it's another thing altogether to know how to do that in practical, every-day, down-to-earth living. Jesus told the religious leaders of his time, "*You understand the weather (over which you have no control), but you're powerless over the things all around you, over which you can exercise some influence.*"

There is one word that can be used to translate both words in our text this morning: "*You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*" The first application refers to a process by which we come to understand a particular reality; the second application refers to a willingness to use the power at our disposal to do something about that reality.

The word that captures both applications is, "discernment." Webster's dictionary says the word means "*the ability to perceive or recognize the difference.*" What difference?

Discernment is, first of all, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, given to the church to help her distinguish between truth and error, to help her recognize whether a vision or a teaching, is from God, or is a product of human ego.

In our situation, it means to distinguish between the demands of the world in

light of the signs of the times, vs. the call of God to minister amid those same signs of the times.

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan celebrated its centennial in 2006. It is the most populace city in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. Almost 200,000 people live there today. Back in the 1940's it was already a thriving town; but not nearly so big. There was one Christian Church there (that was before we called ourselves Disciples of Christ), and it was in Saskatoon. The church never got really established, and for years it struggled along with ten members, and no minister. Discouraged, they met to vote whether to close their doors and sell the property. At that meeting, the one remaining elder asked, "Has anybody consulted God, to see what God wants us to do?"

They made a covenant to pray daily, "God, what do you want to accomplish through us?" When they met the next week, they each seemed reluctant to speak, so the elder said, "I can't explain it, and it seems totally insane, but each time I prayed, I had an unmistakable image of us starting several new congregations."

That opened the door, and the others all began speaking at once. They reported in amazement that each had had similar impressions as they prayed.

It seemed so incredible—only ten of them. But today, three Disciple congregations, two in Edmonton, Alberta, and one in Calgary, owe their existence to those ten Christians. Incidentally, the one in Calgary hosted the 1996 World Convention of Christian Churches, which Jo Lynn and I were privileged to attend.

What they did is called "discernment." What if... What if we...