

Reading the Signs of the Times

"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 the earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Luke 12:54-56 NRSV)

Why do we not know how to interpret the present time? It seems as if many are more able to make cynical comments or baleful predictions of awful futures than to offer up useful wisdom about the times in which we live. As we grow in the Christian life, it's our responsibility to learn to be both innocent as doves (open-hearted and full of love) and wily as serpents (wise in the dynamics and realities of the world).

One way to describe this pairing of soft-heartedness and tough-mindedness (to use Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, language) is *reading the signs of the times*.

This issue takes up this theme with several feature articles. Gene Stolfus, founding director of Christian Peacemaker Teams, offers thoughts on the explosion of nonviolent peacemaking in our times; Daniel Hunter, a young

activist from Philadelphia, writes about a style of action that is helpful in troubled times; and Carol Mason explores how to re-direct fear by bringing awareness of Christ into every situation.

Reading the signs of the times is a spiritual discipline that tries to shake off the lenses of the dominant culture in order to see whether or not the emperor is wearing clothes!

It's a way to focus our sight. Lacking an intentional spiritual focusing, I believe we run the risk

of seeing each other through the lenses provided by the dominant imperial culture. That culture would prefer us to be suspicious of those different from us and ready to kill to defend the nation-state. Reading the signs of the times allows us to see clearly through the fog of fear that surrounds us.

There is a certain rhetorical

style found on both the left and the right, which fixates on wrongness. What is *wrong* with the world? What is *wrong* with my opponents? What is *wrong* with my denomination? This style is sometimes characterized by negative attacks and attitude, focusing overwhelmingly on the President and the Administration, or the liberals or gays or women, or the military-industrial-complex, or whoever your current favorite opponent is.

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Jesus hints about *kairos* thinking when he says, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.

Night and day,
whether he sleeps
or gets up,
the seed sprouts
and grows,
though he does
not know how.

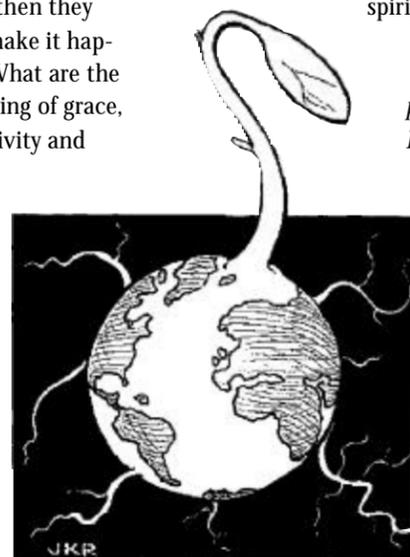
All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." *Mark 4:26-29*

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The obvious next steps are to figure out how to diminish the impact of your opponents. It is fundamentally reactive thinking. Do you ever get snared in this kind of partisan wrongness-thinking?

Kairos, one of the words used for “time” in the New Testament, points toward an alternate perspective which stands out from “wrongness” thinking. *Kairos* is the word used when Jesus says in Mark 1, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” Instead of wrongness, *kairos* focuses on ripeness — on what is coming to fullness in the present moment. I propose that seeking to understand what’s ripe in a situation is a central way for Christians to understand the signs of the times.

What is ripe and ready for justice; what fruit is ready to be harvested; what can we glean? Carol Mason offered me this example in recent correspondence: “To me it is like looking at a vacant lot in the downtrodden area of town, and instead of saying, ‘Oh, this place is so rundown and it is just going to the dogs,’ someone says, ‘This place looks ripe for a community garden’ — and then they join with the ripeness and make it happen! *Kairos* thinking asks, What are the opportunities for an inbreaking of grace, for justice-making, for creativity and bold initiative in the situation you are analyzing? What can you support and assist that is just about to come together? What is God doing, and how am I called as a partner?”



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Don’t get me wrong — a reading of the *kairos* moment definitely acknowledges and understands what’s wrong. To know what’s ripe we also must name what’s still green, or is already rotting — current attitudes, beliefs, or practices that are not of God, the places our communities or institutions are falling short of God’s promises. We need to clearly understand and name the realities of the powers and principalities in our day.

But *kairos* thinking doesn’t get fixated on the wrongness; it remembers also to look to the possibilities that are being born. What are the possibilities surrounding you and your community, just now?

Living in a *kairos* way means confessing faith in God, and striving to worship God instead of idols, which are things intentionally or unintentionally given allegiance with time, money, or other resources. Some favorite idols include comfort, family, the church, the nation state, “how we’ve always done things,” efficiency, one’s favorite social program. What idols do you see in your life right now?

May we all hone our *kairos* vision!

Blessings on your eyes, your spirits, and your labors.

Matt Guynn,
program coordinator,
Peace Witness

Questions for Reflection on the Signs of the Times

- What piece of the kingdom of heaven is ripening right now? For what initiative is it ripe? What is God doing that I can align myself with more closely?
- Where are the current cracks in the facade of the “everything’s-all-right” world? What opportunities are offered by those cracks?
- If Jesus were coming back right now, and you had to brief him on what’s up in the world, what would you say?
- Think of a group to which you belong. Where are the marginalized people in that group? What is the relationship between the edges and the core of the group?
- How would you characterize the quality of relationships, interaction, and communication in the group or community in question?
- With what idols am I or my group currently struggling? What would it mean to more truly worship God in those situations?

by Carol Mason

One of the things that makes Pauline theology so passionate is the fact that Paul truly believes he is living in the end times. He looks around at the world with eyes newly opened by his encounter with the risen Christ, and suddenly it doesn’t matter if he should live or die. “For what is life? To me it is Christ” (Philippians 1:21).

This sense of urgency about the end times awakens our need to live honoring Christ, so that we are conscious of being “salt and light” when all around us seems so dark. I know that when my attention increases on “...heard the news today” (the apostle Paul’s worldly matters of 1 Corinthians 7:33), my attention on the “Lord’s work” diminishes: fear rises and supercedes loving kindness.

Since we know that “Perfect love casts out all fear” (1 John 4:18), we also must admit that fear casts out love in the same way: anxiety feeds reaction and lessens thoughtful response; tensions rise, and our “defense of self” overcomes our compassion for others. Self instead of others, reactive defense instead of responsiveness to need, fear instead of love.

Therefore, as my awareness of overwhelming disaster and violent death increases, I feel my own sense of anguish pump adrenaline into increased heart rate. I must consciously, and with intention, turn to Christ, just as many of our Annual Conference themes have urged us to do in past years, so that, as the familiar hymn states, “the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light...” What this does is make me aware of the

discipline of loving more fully — every human we meet, every task we undertake, and every situation we are in. Making a conscious choice is to be more loving, increasing light and goodness, each and every day. Guide my feet, Lord, put a watch to my lips.

Perhaps in this information age, where we are able to experience the news with an all-around-the-world-at-once viewpoint, we are given a glimpse of God’s view of creation. It is exactly this increased awareness which thus requires of us a greater ability to respond to such news with the



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“mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16) and God’s unfailing love. If it means turning off the TV news and engaging our neighbor in uplifting conversation, do so. If it means building schools on the borders where war has always existed, as the Nuer and Dinka have done in Southern Sudan so that the next generation will be united, do so. For all of us have petty bickerings and distractions we can set aside for the sake of standing together and bringing about the kingdom.

Kairos is the opportunity to bring Christ — the Prince of Peace — into every situation, every conversation,



Carol Mason with grandson Nicky

every decision and choice of our daily lives. It is the way to re-direct the energy of fear into the actions of Micah 6:8. Fear paralyzes. Where there is no movement, there is no hope. Re-directing the energy produced by fear into actions of justice, compassion, and humble service activates hope. Hope swells the light. Light by light, it overcomes all darkness.

Carol Mason is a member of Lacey (WA) Community Church of the Brethren, a TRIM student with the Brethren Academy for Ministerial Leadership, and begins as the Congregational Life Team Coordinator for Area 3 in December. Carol can be contacted at cksmp@yahoo.com.

And this is my prayer,
that your love may overflow more and more
with knowledge and full insight
to help you to determine what is best,

so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

Mission Statement

On Earth Peace Assembly is a movement grounded in the Church of the Brethren dedicated to following the teachings of Jesus Christ in renewing and living out our biblical and denominational heritage of peace. Our purpose, through religious and educational activities, is to empower people to discern the things that make for peace – in ourselves, within families, in our global environment, among nations – and to advocate peace and justice, seeking the realization of God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

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2006 Calendar

January 12-24

Peacemaking Delegation to the Middle East
Israel/Palestine

February 5

“The Power of Faith: From Anger to Forgiveness” featuring SueZann Bosler
Northern Virginia Churches of the Brethren
“School of Christian Growth”
Oakton (VA) Church of the Brethren

February 17-18

Bethany Seminary Intensive Course
Session 1 “Conflict Transformation in the Congregational Setting”
Richmond, Indiana

March 2-5

Training for Shalom Team Members
New Windsor, Maryland

March 10-11

Bethany Seminary Intensive Course
Session 2 “Conflict Transformation in the Congregational Setting”
Richmond, Indiana

April 1

Peaceful Parenting Workshop
Covington (OH) Church of the Brethren

April 7-8

Bethany Seminary Intensive Course
Session 3 “Conflict Transformation in the Congregational Setting”
Richmond, Indiana

April 19

Matthew 18 Training for Trainers
New Windsor, Maryland

May 10

Northern Ohio Pastor’s Training
“Conflict Transformation for Congregational Leaders”
Inspiration Hills, Burbank, Ohio

July 5-11

Song & Story Fest
Camp Pine Lake, Eldora, Iowa

I must make a confession. I have done a terrible thing. I went out one night with a group of friends and we played laser tag. What is scary is that I actually enjoyed it. We each had a laser gun in our hands to shoot at those who were not on our team. Each time we shot at someone, we were rewarded with points.



Logo from "The Lion & Lamb Project"

Each time someone shot at us, our guns were disabled for about thirty seconds. My heart was pumping fast as adrenaline was racing through my body. The game not only became one of shooting, but also one of survival.

When children are allowed to play shooter video games firsthand, much of the same thing happens. The player goes into survival mode while gaining points for every creature he or she kills. Soon, the player is engrossed in the game, and he or she may not be able to distinguish what is happening on the screen from what is happening in reality (especially if under the age of eight). The child is essentially learning violence through their play.

To challenge the marketing of violent play to children, I am working at Northview (IN) Church of the Brethren this semester with Christian Peacemaker Teams’ (CPT) campaign called “Violence is Not Child’s Play.” The task that has been set before me is a difficult and very overwhelming one. I am to stop all the stores in Indianapolis from selling violent toys. I realize that this task may never be accomplished, but I do know that I may be able to stop one parent from giving one child a toy gun for play.

I know that I may be able to introduce

a new way of playing to one family. This way of playing encourages children to free their minds from the unimaginative theory that there is only one solution for all problems. Through violent play, children are taught that when a problem arises, one only needs to kill the enemy. Through more peaceful play, children learn that killing is not a solution, thus allowing children to be more creative in their problem solving.

It is clear that we need to encourage this creative play while discouraging vio-

lent play. But, where do we start? With the schools? With the children? With the stores? With the parents? Will the task ever be completed? I had hoped to be able to end this article with an encouraging thought, but I’m afraid I cannot do that. I feel too overwhelmed by the powers that be — the corporations that sell violence, the culture we live in that teaches violence, and the fear many of us dwell in that encourages violence. Without confronting these powers, change cannot be made. This task is a great one. Will you join me?

Carrie Fry-Miller is a student at Manchester College and a member of the Beacon Heights Church of the Brethren, Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

Ideas to challenge the marketing of violent toys and games, and to think about alternatives

Join CPT’s “Violence is Not Child’s play.” This is a campaign to challenge retailers marketing violence to children by organizing inspections of stores, initiating conversations with store managers and corporate executives, working with the media to inform the public about your findings, and following up with local stores to encourage them to reduce or eliminate their toys and games that promote violence (www.cpt.org/violent_toys/play.php).

Encourage and promote peaceful, nonviolent play at home and in your schools and communities. Host a peaceable playday. The Lion & Lamb Project was an initiative by parents for parents, providing information about the effects of violent entertainment, toys and games on children’s behavior (www.lionlamb.org).

Have a nonviolent toy drive at your church/library. Host a toy gun trade-in. Join popular cartoon character McGruff the Crime Dog in identifying nonviolent toys for children (www.mcgruff.org/Grownups/cs_age_toys.htm).

Make yourself aware of the video games, movies, and television shows your kids are playing and watching. MediaWise provides information about the impact of media on children, and gives people who care about children the resources they need to make informed choices. MediaWise is an initiative of the National Institute on Media and the Family, a non-profit organization (www.mediafamily.org).

Make conscious choices to purchase creative, nonviolent toys and games for your children this holiday season (and all year ‘round)!

The Dancing Signs of Hope

by Gene Stoltzfus



Gene Stoltzfus

In an age when millions are anxious about their security and long for structures that bring peace, the sign of hope that a peace church can bring to people everywhere is breathtaking. Peace and hope incorporate both our personal life styles and our ability to organize competently, explain our vision clearly and live out this vision in our homes and communities. Our work together up to this time has been preparation, like pilot projects where our faith and confidence are tested and our skills refined. Forty years of peace work has taught me that our world is waiting for us to move beyond pilot projects to invite the nonviolent Gospel of peace to become fully visible and an active choice for every citizen of the human family. This can be the defining sign of the twenty-first century.

Twenty years ago, during the discussions about the founding of Christian Peacemaker Teams, I realized, that despite so many voices to the contrary, a sizable minority in our churches were joined by Roman Catholics and many other mainline and evangelical groups, representing a potent force for world peace. I believed that, if organized, we could fundamentally impact spiritual health, social structures, and the perceived legitimacy of war and killing by

nations and neighborhoods striving to achieve justice. The incredible power of active nonviolent peacemaking is the premier sign of our time. People of faith have witnessed the effectiveness of non-violence to push back killing and violence often with amazingly small doses of organized action. We no longer need to be surprised by this.

The effectiveness of nonviolence has been adequately tested, but we are in fact caught in the history that still waits for us to demonstrate this power fully. Over the last twenty years I have carried on conversations about nonviolence and faith in more than twenty countries, often with people who are open to active nonviolence. However, until it is demonstrated more comprehensively, they believe the threat of the gun must be maintained in order for society to be secure. **The final elimination of military force, armed police, and armed national and international guerrilla action will be accomplished when a culture of nonviolence that rejects the gun is expanded exponentially beyond the current base of millions of people and the organizations they support.**

As the statistics of human and economic costs of the Iraq invasion rise, we can feel our hope tested, and we see anger and revenge lurking within. But there are important signs of hope here as well. Never since the formative period of the church in the centuries after Jesus' life have churches worldwide been so unified against war as we witnessed in the period immediately prior to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. Isn't this a sign that there are millions of Christians who may voluntarily consider the invitation to end killing and to embrace the nonviolence inherent in the Gospel of Peace?

But, this sign of hope must be placed in perspective because elements of the Christian community are expressing the same kind of fundamentalism found in

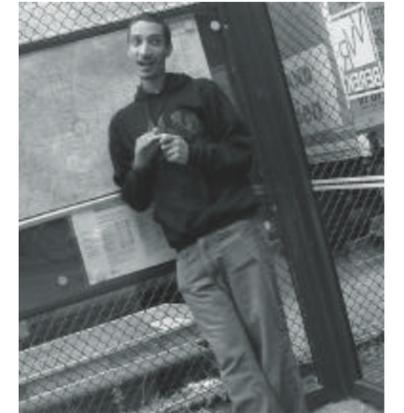
other religious streams that are mean-spirited and violent, and engage in a narrow search for a parochial chauvinistic body politic. When these voices are strongest, it is tempting to forget that light overcomes darkness. We are prone to forget that hope expressed with kind, firm words is a sign; that active nonviolent love in the public marketplace is a sign: they are signs of victory that we are helping to invent. In my work of peacemaking I have found that every strand of Christianity can be invited to the circle of Bible study, prayer, worship, and the central thread of Jesus' peacemaking. However, when we are caught in a confined liberal or evangelical ideological conviction we are tempted to eliminate the possibility of authentic common prayer and the effective expression of the Gospel of peacemaking.

Our tendency to get caught in the negative foibles of our ethnic life, organizational and church life, the legacy of racism and domination thinking, keeps us from being the dancing signs of hope we are created to be. These foibles and, yes, sins, have driven many of our colleagues into solitary individualism, cynicism, or depression. Hopeful people organize themselves, work together, and sustain their efforts over long periods despite individual tensions and great national differences. We also learn to celebrate and worship in ways that lift up the unity of our souls and the Gospel of Peace while respecting various paths to spiritual abundance. The most treasured but often overlooked sign of our age is the hope demonstrated by peacemakers. It is contagious and inviting. It leads to deeper spiritual life.

Gene Stoltzfus retired in 2004 as founding director of Christian Peacemaker Teams (www.cpt.org), and is living in Winnipeg, Canada. Gene can be contacted at genestoltz@yahoo.com.

Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

by Daniel Hunter



Daniel Hunter

More and more people see the United States as an empire in decline. It is over-stretching itself in Iraq, increasing its trade debt astronomically, and unable to even pretend to take care of its own poor citizens after a hurricane. These conditions have created a teachable moment to help bring a new consciousness to the United States. There are two different approaches to how we do that. Imagine a man crossing a high, rickety bridge. A woman on the other side is helping him across. "Don't look down!" she yells. Immediately, as you can guess, he steals a glance down. Terror seizes him. Rather than continuing across the chasm, he freezes.

Now imagine that same situation. Instead of telling him what not to do, she says, "Keep your eyes on me." He hears the words and follows them. He makes it safely across.

It is a basic lesson for trained emergency rescuers and national guard: focus people on the positive behavior. "Keep your eyes on me. . . . Keep breathing." The same lesson we should use in the midst of political despair. Like the emergency rescuer, we should call forth the behaviors that will help us navigate across the chasm of despair into a culture of deep democracy and friendliness to the needy.

So if we are to follow that advice and "Keep your eyes on me," where do we focus our attention? I want to suggest four areas for us to give our attention.

These can help keep our minds and souls from being gripped by terror:

- *Keep our eyes on social movements outside of the US, especially the Global South:* For decades the United States government has undermined people's justice movements around the world. As its influence is reduced, more social movements will be able to win, especially in the global south. This is a great place to seek hopefulness.
- *Focus on community self-sustainability:* When 9/11 happened, New York City people turned out to comfort each other. People's natural response was to support each other; strangers helped

each other find food and family. This showed itself in New Orleans where people supported each other, despite the government's undermining of communities. Since the government and media will not acknowledge that community support, we have to name it and support its emergence.

- *Watch for new coalitions of resistance:* Local

community organizing is hard when the empire is becoming more paranoid. When the empire was economically stronger, the "pie" was getting larger, and it could more easily afford to make slight increases in the unfairly small piece of the pie it gave blacks, or poor people, or women. Now, fighting for a bigger slice will be harder. On the other hand, this will force us into new coalitions to increase people

No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness.

If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.

Luke 11:33-35

power. Service Employees International Union which works across international borders or the diverse groups protesting the war are just some examples.

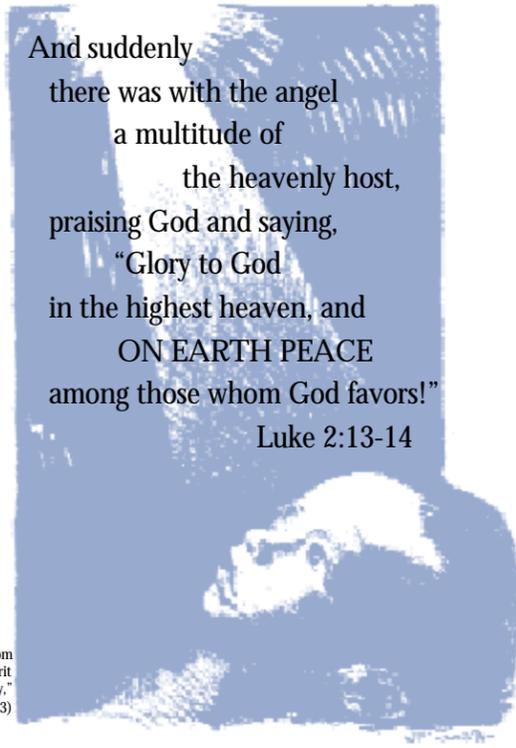
- *Come to terms with being in an empire — it's healthier for our psychology:* For a long time many naive people inside the US thought of our country as the bastion of freedom and democracy. Even the more cynical people could not always come to terms with the scope of the US empire — or the way that living in the empire warps our own perspective. As this process unfolds, we'll have more chances for people to step outside of imperialistic thinking. For example, US activists will have more opportunity to learn from our fellow activists (like at the World Social Forum). This is healthy for us. As we collectively move across the rickety bridge, we can follow the words of the rescuers who model offering to people the positive behavior. In the words of the African-American spiritual, let us remember to "Keep your eyes on the prize."

Daniel Hunter is a Training Associate with Training for Change, a Philadelphia-based NGO whose mission is to increase quality training among people dedicated to social change (www.TrainingForChange.org). Daniel can be contacted at hyrax1@gmail.com.

Joy. Hope. Wonder. Courage. Love.
Peace. Let us hold on to these gifts
given to us during this special time
of year that allow us to experience the
mysteries of God.

The staff and board of On Earth Peace
greatly appreciate your prayers, support,
and commitment that enable us to carry
these gifts with us throughout the year.
May you and your family be blessed in
this season of peace.

Rene Boldt (from
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And suddenly
there was with the angel
a multitude of
the heavenly host,
praising God and saying,
"Glory to God
in the highest heaven, and
ON EARTH PEACE
among those whom God favors!"
Luke 2:13-14



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