

Breaking and entering: Sunday, March 18 (Luke 13:1-9)

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [March 7, 2001](#) issue

In the little Georgia country church of my childhood, there was a story the older folks loved to tell again and again, laughing over it and savoring it and embellishing it. The tale involved a certain Sunday night in October 1938. Evening prayer services were in full swing when a man named Sam, a member of the congregation who lived down the road from the church, charged into the prayer meeting trembling with fear and excitement. Finally gaining the breath to speak, he shouted, "Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships! Some of 'em have already landed in New Jersey!" The preacher halted in midsentence; the congregation stared at Sam blankly. "I s-s-swear," he stammered, now a little unsure of his footing. "I h-h-heard it on the radio."

What Sam had heard, of course, was Orson Welles's now infamous Mercury Theater radio production of *War of the Worlds*, but no one in the congregation was aware of that at the moment. For all they knew, the world outside was coming to a flaming end. The little flock looked apprehensively at the preacher, but he was mute and indecisive, never having had a sermon disrupted by interplanetary invasion. Finally one of the oldest members of the congregation, a red-clay farmer of modest education, stood up, gripped the pew in front of him with his large, callused hands, and said, "I 'speck what Sam says ain't completely true, but if it is true, we're in the right place here in church. Let's go on with the meetin'." And so they did.

Spaceships landing in New Jersey? Signs of the end of the world? The old farmer sized it all up, measured it against his rough-hewn view of providence, and decided it was better to be in church praising God than running around the cow pasture shooting buckshot into the night sky.

According to Jesus, most of us are not nearly as astute as this farmer at reading the signs of the times, at distinguishing what matters and what doesn't, at discerning what is truly happening in God's world. Indeed, Jesus says that most of us are far better at meteorology than theology. "You hypocrites!" Jesus thunders. "You know

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

Jesus is talking, of course, about God's pregnant time, the breaking-in of God's reign like a thief in the night, plundering and destroying the old order. "Watch for it," Jesus says. "Be on the alert. Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit."

The signs of this new reality breaking in and summoning us to a new way of life are all around us. But what are we looking for? Armageddon-like rumblings in the Middle East? Some readers of the "Left Behind" novels might say as much. Violence in the schools? The deepening resentment of American power and arrogance? The spread of AIDS?

"You haven't a clue," Jesus said, "about how to interpret the present time." No sooner had Jesus issued this challenge than some in the crowd stepped forward. "Don't say we cannot read the times. How about that terrible incident in the temple, the one where Pilate's police slaughtered some innocent worshipers from Galilee?"

"No," Jesus responded, "it isn't a sign. And don't bother bringing up the tragic case where the tower of Siloam collapsed, killing 18 people," he added. "That is not the kind of sign I mean either."

What is the sign of God's pregnant time? We must watch closely and faithfully, or we will miss it. To sharpen our vision, Jesus tells a parable about an orchard owner who was frustrated by a barren fig tree and ordered the gardener to cut the tree down. "Sir," pleads the gardener, "let's nurture it, care for it and give it one more year."

*That's it.* That is the sign of the times, the clue to the breaking in of God's reign. Not the Hale-Bopp Comet, not invaders from space, not Clinton as King Belshazzar redux, not wars or rumors of war, but instead the gracious and patient hand that reaches out to halt the ax, the merciful gesture woven into the fabric of life that stays all that would give up on the barren and the broken, the merciful voice that says, "Let's give this hopeless case one more year."

"Even now," cried John the Baptist, "the ax is lying at the root of the trees." But Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Let's give this one more year."

Pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner used to tell about the state-run mental hospital where truly hopeless cases were relegated to a back ward. The psychiatrists and

other medical staff avoided this ward, making only the bare minimum of calls and writing off the patients there as unsalvageable. Then a women's group from a local church began, as a matter of compassion, to visit the patients in this hospital. No one bothered to tell them that the patients in the back ward were abandoned cases, so they visited them regularly, bringing flowers, fresh baked cookies, prayer, cheerfulness and mercy. Before long, some of the patients began to respond, a few of them even becoming healthy enough to move to other wards. At one level, this was merely a church group doing what church groups do. At another level, it was a sign of the times.