

Professor Tom Long tells the story of a little country church in Georgia and the tale the older folk like to tell again and again –savoring and embellishing it as they tell it each time. It was Sunday evening back in October 1938. The prayer service was in full swing when a man named Sam, a member of the congregation who lived down the road, charged into the prayer meeting out of breath. He was trembling uncontrollably. Finally gasping, he shouted, *"Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships. Some of'em have already landed in New Jersey!"* The preacher stopped his sermon and there was stone silence. *"I swear it's true! Jest heard it on the radio."*

What he heard, of course, was Orson Welles' now infamous Mercury Theater radio production of *'War of the Worlds,'* but no one in the congregation was aware of that. For all they new the world outside that little clapboard church was coming to an end. The little flock looked apprehensively at the preacher. He had never had a sermon interrupted by a Martian invasion. He looked indecisive, bewildered. Just then an old red clay farmer, a man of a modest education, stood up and gripped the pew in front of him with his large calloused hands and said: *'I speck what Sam says ain't completely true, but if it is true, we're in the right place. So lets git on with the meetin', preacher!'* And they did.

The old farmer was wiser than he knew. Sizing up the state of the world these days, it's better to be worshipping the Lord than trying to figure out what's happening. Nations are at war. Peoples' faiths kill 'infidels' in other parts of the world. Climatic changes, earthquakes, floods, mudslides and the ravaging effects of El Niño - sometimes you wonder what's happening to God's world. Sometimes it seems like it's right out of biblical end-time writing.

How in the world do we interpret these present times? "You don't have a clue!" Jesus told his listeners. He tells of two incidents – one in the temple where Pilate's police slaughtered some innocent worshippers in the middle of their sacrifices –not to mention that tragic case in Siloam where a tower tipped over and killed 18 people." They aren't God's signs. Things do happen. God's signs are people working things out in their souls.

God's signs are 'pregnant times?" Old Georgia farmers have a born wisdom about life. What they may lack in a sophisticated education, they certainly have in horse sense. Tilling the ground and planting the seeds that bring about food and abundance, they know that patience is always necessary. Just like God doesn't hurry along the crops, so humans shouldn't hurry themselves along. During my internship back in 1970, I met Elvin Herbst, a farmer with calloused hands and wise by the day's standards. Elvin never rushed anything. And many of the business types and higher echelon of the congregation sought his wisdom out. He knew about God's pregnant time. As Council President he'd often say, "Let's think it through."

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Elvin might tell the parable a little differently: "This orchard owner was frustrated because one of the trees was not producin' fruit, so he called the gardener in to cut the 'dang' thing down. But the gardener fellow tried to talk him out of it. "I'd say let's give it some time and good fertilizer and I'll work on it a little more with." Sometimes Elvin's wisdom on any issue was just: 'let's give it a little time.' He had a God-like love for the earth and people.

God's pregnant time is about patience and grace and cultivating. Earthquakes and climatic changes aren't signs of the End. They're part of a maturing planet. And wars have always been around us. God's way is patience. God grants time and opportunity for humans to see in one another sisters and brothers, who, despite our differences, have common ground. Our beliefs and creeds may create conflict, but it would be better if the whole planet survived than that our different beliefs and creeds would threatening one another. Sometimes the best hope we have is 'another year to work it out.'

- Seward Hiltner, a pastoral theologian, tells about a state-run mental hospital, where truly hopeless cases were placed in a back ward, far off from the patients. Hospital nurses, psychiatrists and even clergy avoided the ward like the plague. They often called it 'the vegetable ward.' But that didn't keep a women's group from the First Baptist Church from starting an outreach ministry there. No one bothered to tell them the 'Vegetable Ward' was hopeless. They brought flowers and fresh baked cookies as well as their music and prayers –and not the least their cheerful attitudes about life. They saw these folks as a community of God's children. Before long, some of the patients started doing what was previously thought impossible: they started becoming healthy and responsive enough to wander out into other wards. The nursing staff and psychiatrists were amazed. The church ladies were doing something none of the regular staff had bothered to do. 'They were giving them time... tilling and cultivating their lives with their openness and compassion.

God's time is a 'pregnant' time, filled with expectation, hope, waiting even with uncertainty. Like the prodigal father in that famous parable: every day he went out to the end of the lane just looking for that lost son. He should have spit nails when the ruthless malcontent returned home. But he welcomed him with open arms. I like to think maybe the prodigal son was so overwhelmed with his father's love that he grew up and become productive. We don't know. We just know the Father waited. Jesus tells us God is the same. God waits, because just maybe we'll find a fit of life and blossom where we're planted. Amen.