

December 23, 2007

Isaiah 7:1-17

Matthew 1:18-25

There is an old sixties song that goes, “Sign, sign everywhere a sign. Blockin out the scenery. Breakin my mind. Do this. Don’t do that. Can’t you read the sign?”

As this Advent season brings us right up to edge of Christmas, this is the question we are asked with King Ahaz and Joseph, “Can you read the sign?” and “How will you respond once you see it?”

The sixties song raged against all the ways we use signs to control each other and the world around us. Which is still true, but signs have their purpose too. They let us know where to go like street signs and highway directions. They let us know what kind of place we are entering (a doctor’s office or a grocery store) and whether or not we are welcome. Signs give us information, they inspire us, they encourage us to consume more, and they warn us when there is danger. They instruct us on what kind of behavior is acceptable or not and provide rules for good order and safety. They are posted so we will be prepared for what we will encounter next.

In many ways, this is how signs work in the Bible too. God, through the prophets and other messengers, spoke of signs to warn, give assurance, call the people to obedience, and give a visible sign of promise for what would come for the people and all of creation. God gave signs to encourage trust and hope in order to move the person or people to act in faith, usually in a direction or purpose that they could not see the ending or toward a decision that went against the norms, expectations, and common sense of the moment.

Take King Ahaz. When the prophet Isaiah came to him and said, “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; ...” Ahaz, the king of Judah, was in the midst of a political and international nightmare. He feared and anticipated a looming threat from the kingdoms of Syria and Israel, so he was figuring out how he could make a preemptive strike, so he could stay in power. Isaiah comes to him and offers him another way, a walk of faith with God. What looks like an appropriate response from Ahaz, to not put God to the test by naming a sign, actually is resistance from Ahaz. A sign from God might mean he would have to change his plans, give up control of the situation. Any ruler worth his salt knows that if you back down from a fight or take advice from another, it is a sign of weakness and your opponents will take advantage of this. No, it is much better to stay the course.

But, God intends to give Ahaz a sign, whether he asks for it or not. It is an odd kind of sign for a king on the brink of war. Isaiah says, a young woman will give birth to a son and before the boy has reached the age of two, the age when he can figure out right from wrong, the two nations the king is so worried about will no longer be a threat.

What kind of sign is this? You can somewhat understand why Ahaz might be resistant toward God getting involved. There’s no power or flash or extraordinary element to this sign. A young woman giving birth happens fairly frequently. Secondly, knowing if the sign will point to what the prophet says will involve patience and faith, while common sense says a threat looms on his borders. Not acting shows cowardice and a lack of ability to protect his kingdom.

By Joseph's time and for the community, who first experienced the Gospel of Matthew, one of the primary signs of God's activity in the world was a consistency with the law, and a fulfillment of scripture. It's why the Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy, connecting the birth of Jesus all the way back to Abraham and the royal line of David. In order for Jesus to have a chance at being the promised Messiah, the sign of the fulfillment of God's kingdom, he had to be an heir of King David. And even more than that the writer of Matthew makes the claim that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that we just heard. "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel, which means, "God is with us." So, this must be the work of God.

The struggle with this sign is that for it to come to pass, Joseph, a righteous man, must deal with the law and what it commands. When Mary tells him she is pregnant, he knows that he is not the father. As a good Jewish man, the law requires he respond to this adultery with stoning or divorce. He chooses the most lenient interpretation of the law, by responding with compassion and deciding to dismiss Mary quietly.

Secondly, he must overcome the manner in which the sign is given. It comes as an angelic sign in a dream, "Do not be afraid. The Holy Spirit is at work in all this. Continue as Mary's husband. Take the child as your son and name him, Jesus, which means 'He who saves' and Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" In order for the world to receive this sign from God, Joseph must act in way that goes against God's law, as he understands it, and trust that he didn't eat something funny before he fell asleep that caused him to have a crazy dream. A dream, which opens up the possibility that God was fulfilling the Messianic promise all were yearning for, through his ordinary life as a carpenter, husband, and adoptive father.

When you think of signs from God, what do you look for? I particularly would like God to start using neon signs; bright, specific words of instruction and promise that leave no room for misinterpretation. Something that will hit me over the head like a sledgehammer, so I know what it is that God intends for me to do and fully comprehend the purpose for which I have been called. Moses got a talking, burning bush. The shepherds got a singing, angelic heavenly host. The disciples witnessed water changed to wine and thousands fed with only a few loaves of bread. Where are our signs today?

The trouble with these powerful, bright glimpses of God's glory is that we quickly forget them, rationalize them away or grow to expect them with more frequency and in greater splendor. Our prayers start to sound like, I will trust, follow, change or whatever, ... if I witness this or experience that or if that particular prayer is answered.

But, with Ahaz and Joseph the Holy Spirit moves among us here today, outside of our control and expectation. In a mysterious concrete way, we will witness the sign of the Spirit's presence through the splashing of baptismal waters. Nothing flashy. Ordinary water + words of God's promise. God gave us this sacrament as a means to participate in the grace, Jesus' birth revealed and name proclaims. In these waters and through the words of promise, God is with us forgiving anew, giving life, and claiming another child for the work of the kingdom. Through this sign, we are invited again, to let go of our need to explain all this or see exactly how our life will unfold or even be certain about how God will

fulfill God's promises; only trust God is with us, opening possibilities of new life with each new day.

Signs, signs everywhere signs. ... Can you read the signs?
And when you do, what will your response be?

With this gift of grace, we are called to walk by faith. I saw a good definition of faith the other day, "Faith is moving forward with your eyes closed and heart open." It is the only way to anticipate and truly receive the surprising sign of Christmas time; with eyes closed and hearts open. Because, our eyes tell us that this world is too full of sorrow, enemies, violence, and self-interest for God to make a difference. ... Our eyes tell us the differences between our neighbors and peoples of the world cannot be bridged. Our eyes tell us material things, popularity, and image indicate God's blessing, yet also, there will never be enough. Our eyes cling to what we think we know, but the Spirit of God continues the work of Christ to make things new and transform lives beyond our expectations. For when the Spirit blows, it will show our hearts that with the love of God, anything is possible.

Even the birth of a child can save the world.

Let us pray, "O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today; We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel." Amen.