

Isaiah 7:1-16
Matthew 1:18-25
Creekside COB
The Fourth Sunday in Advent

“Taking the Sign”

I'm old enough to remember when searchlights were a common sight in the night sky. The intense beam made a silver shaft of light that swung back and forth on the horizon like a giant metronome. It could be seen for miles, and was a sign that something special was going on. If you followed the light to its source, however, it was then a big disappointment...if you were a kid. More often than not, the light came from the grand opening of a new grocery store or a car sale at Bennett's Chevrolet. Whoopee!

We called them searchlights, but they weren't *searching* for anything. They were beacons *beckoning* us. “Drop whatever you are doing. Get in the car. Come and see. You won't want to miss it.”

Long ago, on a serene, silent night, God turned on a beacon. There was a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn that caught the attention of three learned men in Persia and it set them on a journey to Bethlehem. Shepherds on their watch saw the night sky morph into a choir loft, and the hills echoed with the music of angel voices and beating wings.

The shepherdess just told you about that night. She stayed behind, keeping watch over the dogs (and flocks) by night while the rest of the shepherds ran to Bethlehem to see a remarkable thing that had taken place. She thought she would explode before they returned to tell her everything – that is everything they could manage to make sense of.

A second-hand report, however, is not a first-hand experience, so she ran to see for herself if there was something to her

friend's wild-eyed, tongue-tied tale. The only thing faster than her feet was the pounding of her heart and the whirl in her head as she tried to imagine the sign. *"For unto you this day... is born a savior... Christ the Lord... the Messiah... the One in whom all hopes and dreams are destined to find their fulfillment."*

Given the Steven Spielberg spiritual special effects heralding the Messiah's arrival, she was prepared for something spectacular. And when she saw him, it blew her mind, but not as she imagined. There was the Messiah -- in a feed trough, whimpering and wrapped up in rags with his exhausted mother beside him in the hay. He wore no baby crown. No red-velvet bunting. There were no royal guards. No trumpet fanfare. No shining aura around his face -- just a little fleck of cow manure on his cheek.

The angel of the Lord said, "This shall be a sign for you..." That's what we want -- signs, pointers, a voice saying, "Hey! Over here!" If a spiritual encounter is legitimate, there has to be evidence. The burden of proof is upon God "If you are real, show me a sign." We assume that signs must shimmer or shake us or speak with a voice like James Earl Jones. A nine hundred foot Jesus appeared to Oral Roberts. We will settle for less than that. Just show us *something*, Lord.

What we fail to realize is that God has surrounded with signs -- not royal and regal ones, not high definition, Surround-Sound signs, but signs that strike us as small and far too simple.

King Ahaz of Judah was beside himself. Judah's neighbors, Aram and Remaliah were rattling their sabers. When Ahaz heard that Aram formed an alliance with Ephraim, Isaiah 7: 2 says, "...the heart of Ahaz and his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." God sent Isaiah to encourage Ahaz. "Take heed, be quiet, do not fear..." But Ahaz wasn't someone who could be easily assured.

Realizing that God's words didn't assure him, Isaiah knew something more was necessary. God would give a sign, and the remarkable thing was that Ahaz could choose the sign! "Pick a sign...any sign!" It could be as deep as Hell and as high as

heaven. Talk about a deal that couldn't be refused-- but Ahaz refused it. It sounds as if he did it for four pious reasons. "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." Instead it was a refusal to trust in a spiritual means of support. Ahaz turned away from his spiritual heritage. He abandoned integrity. He entered corrupt alliances and tried to secure power through back room politics and the sword. He could not trust God because he trusted more in self-will. He was faithless.

What happens next attests to the incomprehensible desire of God to be in relationship with humanity. Isaiah said, "Okay, Ahaz. If you don't choose a sign, God will give you one. "A young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." If Ahaz wouldn't come to God, then God was going to come to Ahaz. "I'm coming to you as a child with all the risks and dangers associated with human birth. I will be vulnerable and subject to all the possibilities of pain and harm. I'll be with you now, and I'll be with you in the future. I'll be with you always."

Fast-forward several hundred years to a world where people's hearts were still shaking like trees in the wind. People were under the thumb of imperial Rome. A prophet hadn't spoken in centuries. Yet to lowly shepherds who had no status or influence, an angel appeared and said, "Don't be afraid. I've got good news of great joy for all people... to you this day is born the Messiah. And this will be a sign for you—you shall find a baby..."

Isn't God strange? We're nervous wrecks because the world is coming apart at the seams, and God tells us what God told Ahaz, "Take heed. Be quiet. Do not fear. There's a sign that everything is going to work out, as it should. In the city of David is a baby who is your Savior." Today, most people continue to think security is linked to bigger military budgets, or the strength of the dollar. And at Christmas, God points to the sign of our salvation.

The parents among us will testify to the fact that everything changes when a baby arrives. The world is turned upside down, and as the baby changes, so do you.

There is a South African film, which won an Academy Award in 2005. It is called “Tsotsi,” which means “thug.” The central character is a teenager named David, a notorious thug who stabbed a man to death and belonged to a gang that made money through robbery and other crime. One day David stole a car, only to discover after he had gotten away that there was a baby in the back seat. But instead of dropping the baby off, David decides to keep the baby. He takes it to his hideout where he intends to take care of it, even though he knows nothing about how to do it.

After failed attempts at feeding and changing, David realized he needed help, and he got it the only way he knew—he kidnapped a young mother at gunpoint and ordered her to breastfeed the baby. Naturally, she is unnerved, but it becomes immediately apparent that she knows more about caring for a baby than he does. He had the gun, but she was in control.

David tries to understand why he is so attracted to the baby. Then it dawns on him that he identifies with the baby. There are flashbacks of David’s mother who had gotten sick and died when he was young. His father was abusive, so David ran away from home and became a tough guy that people feared. But what he longed for more than anything was to be parented himself. He so identified with the baby that he names him David, after himself.

Unlike other stories where a relationship with a baby turns a bad person into a saint, transformation doesn’t happen this way to David. He returned the baby to his parents, and is then arrested and thrown into prison. Even so, he is a better person than he was. A new life had an impact on his life. David knew there was an alternative for his life.

What does it mean? Instead of living according to self-will, we will do well to know what to do with the signs God gives us. The

sign doesn't come from the Iowa caucuses, in the trail of a Cruise missile, or the next bill from Congress that is signed into law. The sign is the baby ball of flesh and blood God made of himself and laid in a manger—in a baby who is Immanuel, God-with-us who will save us from our sins and ourselves.

It should be enough to make you think twice whenever you see a baby. When a child is born we play an exercise in the obvious. What's her name? How much did she weigh? How long was she? What color is her hair? Does she take after her mother or father? The next time you spot a baby, see in it the most profound, abiding sign God has given the world. Birth is a sign that happens day after day after day. It is the reminder that God is with us and will never forsake us, regardless of the circumstances. In the words of Isaiah, it is a reminder that God's love is deeper than Sheol and higher than heaven.

I want you to listen to what Henri Nouwen had to say about the hope that is ours at Christmas:

Christmas is saying 'yes' to a hope based on God's initiative, which has nothing to do with what I think or feel. Christmas is believing that the salvation of the world is God's work and not mine. Things will never look just right or feel just right. If they did, someone would be lying... but it is into this broken world that a child is born who is called the Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, Savior.

At Advent I read a book of poems by the Presbyterian pastor, J. Barrie Shepherd called, *Faces At the Manger*. Before I leave you, I want you to think about the sign God has given us as you listen to "The Shepherd's Question:"

What kind of sign was that, then?
Not the new star, strange as that may seem;
not even the angels, or those weird travelers from the east;
but a rag-wrapped baby in a feed box.
*I ask you, was that a sign to shake the gates of Hell
or even Rome?*

Yes, there was blood around,
the signs of agony still stained the wooden beams,
although the worst had already been cleared away.
Birth it was; another birth. No more-no less.

The baby nursed like a whole world athirst—
power in those little jaws seeking mother's milk
like love from heaven.
And that hand, as firm upon the breast
as if he grasped the globe of life itself and held it
strong and tender.

The sign grew up, or so I heard.
Came to a no-good end, they say.
Maybe that's all we can look for from our signs—
a gleam of light, a night of peace, before they fade away.
Who knows?