

# **“The Lord will give you a sign”**

Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

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I want to reflect with you today on our Old Testament lesson, the story we heard from Isaiah 7 where the prophet tells the king to ask for a sign.

The king, as you heard, didn't want to ask for a sign. He said, **“God is too busy. I don't want to bother him.”**

So, Isaiah said, **“Well, you're going to get a sign anyway, and here it is: A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and he will be called Immanuel.”**

Now, I would like to reflect with you this morning on what it means to get a sign from God, but before we do that I want to read for you our New Testament lesson. This is the Christmas story as we find it in Matthew's gospel, and it's a very different angle or perspective from the one we find in Luke chapter 2.

Listen for God's word.

**<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:**

**<sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”**

**which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

I did something last week in preparation for today that I probably should not have done. I allowed a question that I had never really thought about before to get under my skin. I let it nag at me and annoy me. And finally I let it get the better of me.

The question was about that sign that Isaiah gave to Ahaz. **“What kind of a sign is that?”** I wondered. **“And why is God always giving signs to people? The Bible, as you probably know, is filled with them. Why?”**

In Luke 2, an angel appears to the shepherds while they're keeping watch over their flocks by night, and the angel said to them, **“This will be a sign for you. You will find a baby, wrapped in bands of cloth, and lying in a manger.”**

I have always wondered what that meant. How can a baby be a sign of something? And a sign of what? When the shepherds went running off to Bethlehem to find this baby, looking for a burning lamp (maybe) to indicate that someone was still awake, what did they expect to find? What did they expect to see?

I was blessed to grow up in a Christian family – mom, dad, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents were all believers, every single one of them – and I was part of a larger Christian community as well, and these were people who did not look for signs.

As some of you know, I grew up among second- and third-generation Dutch immigrants to the United States, and I think it's fair to say that these were practical people. They were farmers and furniture makers and school teachers.

Like most immigrant groups, they worked hard, they worked long hours, and they didn't have time for mystery and wonder. That was not the faith that they embraced. To them all of that was frivolous. They had the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule, and beyond that what did you really need?

**"Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you."** There was no mystery in that. Jesus said it, so do it!

However, as I grew up, and as I ventured out into the world, I began to notice that there were different kinds of Christian people. They weren't all exactly like the ones from my childhood, which (I have to say) came as quite a surprise. I met people along the way who had mystical experiences, people who talked with God, people who heard God speak to them. These people lived in a world I knew nothing about.

And partly, I was attracted to that, I loved the mystery and wonder of it, still do, but I was also distrustful of it, because of how I was brought up to think of the Christian faith.

As I mentioned, the Bible is filled with signs that God gives to people. There's no denying that the Bible is filled with this wonder and mystery in how God communicates with us.

Way back in the Book of Exodus (chapter 3), Moses is at the burning bush, having a conversation with God (speaking of mystical experiences), and Moses said to God, **"Who am I that I should bring your people out of Egypt?"**

And God said – do you remember God's answer to that question? – God said, **"Don't worry. I will be with you. And this will be a sign for you. After you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship me on this mountain. Remember that."**

And of course that's not the only example. All the way at the end of the Bible – or almost at the end – in the Epistle to the Hebrews – the author there is making an argument about faith. In other words, how do we know that our faith is true? What evidence do we have?

So, the author writes, **"Well, first it was the Lord who told us. It was Jesus himself. And then it was attested to us by those who heard him – his disciples and followers – and finally God added his own testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles."** Hebrews 2:4, if you want to study it further.

In other words, God is still speaking to us. God is still showing or pointing the way. And the biggest, most important sign of all – the Bible seems to say – is Jesus himself, Immanuel.

As far as Christian believers are concerned, he is the reason for this season of the year. We take time right about now to look into the manger. We stand side by side with the shepherds gazing at this child who has been born. He has been given to us a sign of God's intentions in the world.

And what happens – or what is supposed to happen – as we look is that we remember the promise that the angel gave to us, the promise of peace, but not just any sort of peace. This was a promise that the world would be restored to the way it was meant to be, God's shalom.

**"To us a child is born,"** the prophet wrote, **"to us a son is given, and – this has always amazed me – the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."**

Look, the first and most important thing I want to say to you today is, Be careful!

Signs are all around us. We are surrounded by signs. We cannot avoid them. To the person of faith, they are everywhere, and they are unmistakable. As the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, God continues to speak to us. As a theology professor once said to my class, **"We believe in a talkative God."**

But here's the thing: those signs are sometimes difficult to understand, and they are easily misinterpreted.

I would even say (and I wonder if you would agree with me about this) that seeing and understanding these signs requires practice. We need to learn to see. And maybe (this would be my advice) we need to apprentice ourselves to (or hang around with) people who seem to be good at noticing these signs.

A number of years ago, I was meeting with a man who thought he should make a change in his life – from a successful career in business to ... elementary school teaching. And obviously it was a major decision, and a great deal was at stake. He had a wife, and a family, and a house which was not fully paid for. He went through a very difficult time with this decision, which is why eventually he came to see me.

After a couple of difficult conversations, he came to see again, and this third time – oh my – he was relaxed and cracking jokes. His face was bright. All of the tension was gone. And I said, **“What happened? You look like a different person.”**

And then he described for me something that happened one night while he was driving. It was a rainy night, the windshield wipers were struggling to keep the glass clean, and to his right he thought he saw a sign in front of a store. And all he could make out was the word **“Go.”**

And to him this meant something, so he kept driving, but he also kept looking. And then, a little farther on, he saw another sign – again, a single word **“now.”**

And he thought, **“Go...now. That’s what I’ve been waiting for. It’s so clear.”**

My first response, which I didn’t share with him, was, **“Really? You are going to make the biggest decision of your life based on that?”**

As I say, I did not say that to him!

But as a pastor in that situation, I thought, **“What is my responsibility to this man?”** Do I say, **“Well, that’s ridiculous – “go now.” That could mean anything. Get a grip, man!”**

Instead, I said to him, **“Tell me this. Did you notice those two signs because they confirmed what you had already been thinking, the decision you had already made? Or did you notice them because they came as complete surprise, because those words were totally unexpected, something you never expected to see?”**

What I was trying to say that man – and remarkably enough we are still friends – what I tried to say is that signs from God usually point us in a direction we did not expect to go. Signs from God are often counter-intuitive. They come to us when we are not expecting them. The wonder of them is that we could not have imagined them on our own.

The sign that Isaiah gave to king Ahaz was so totally unexpected that ... it had the ring of truth to it. Does that make sense?

God was unexpectedly speaking a word of hope into a situation of utter hopelessness. Things could not have been more bleak. The kingdom that David had built was crumbling and would not survive.

But, you see, God *usually* takes us by surprise. God typically says the unexpected. If you are looking for a sign right now, I would say, **“It will not be what you what you expected it to be.”**

When we have just about given up, when we are feeling tired and spent and worthless and angry and lonely, it’s then that God says, **“I have good news for you, good news of a great joy, which shall be to all the people. For to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”**

It seems to me that we pay attention to words like those because they take us by surprise.

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I found a quote last week that – at first, anyway – I really liked. I had never seen it before. **“A lonely day”** – this is how it goes – **“a lonely day is God’s way of saying that he wants to spend some quality time with you.”**

And at first I thought, **“Oh, how lovely. Isn’t that nice? I wish I had pillow with those words in a flowing script.”**

But the longer I thought about those words, the more I started to wonder about them. (It’s not easy being me.) I thought, **“Maybe a lonely day is God’s way of saying you should get out and make some new friends. Maybe a lonely day is God’s way of saying that you feel sorry for yourself too much.”**

A lonely day could mean just about anything.

So, here’s the next point I want to make: the signs that we think we see, the whispers we hear that we think are from God himself to us – they need to be consistent with what God is doing in the world. They need to fit the pattern.

The birth of a baby in Bethlehem should have been no surprise. We read the Old Testament today, especially prophets like Isaiah, and everything seems so clear to us now. Of course God was planning this all along.

If you read Isaiah closely, all of the clues and hints and signs are there. God had been planning this for centuries.

Isaiah 53: **“For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
And like a root out of dry ground:**

**He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,**

**nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him of no account.”**

Tell me. Who else could that be? We hear those words today, and of course we see Jesus. Don't we? It can only be him.

But at the time, it was not so clear. It would have been counter-intuitive, not at all what they were expecting.

And for large numbers of people today – you may be one of them – it's still not clear. But we who have trained our minds to see and hear God's word to us, we know. We understand. It makes sense. And it is good news, wonderful news.

I once made pastoral calls in a hospital that played Brahm's *Lullaby* over the sound system every time a baby was born at the hospital. Clever, right? And the first time I heard it, I stopped to listen, and I smiled and thought, **“Awww, isn't that nice. How special.”**

But after a few years of making visits there, I didn't even hear it anymore. Staff members didn't hear it anymore. No one paid any attention at all. The birth of a baby? What do you expect at a hospital?

So, how does God decide to come into the world? How does God decide to make himself known to you? Are there announcements and news releases and press conferences and stadium rallies?

No. None of that. Just the opposite, in fact.

God came quietly. Sure, we can assume that Jesus made Mary and Joseph happy, that they looked at him that night with a mixture of awe and fear, like all new parents, excited and scared at the same time, but beyond them...who was even aware of Jesus' birth?

A bunch of shepherds? Okay, yes. But no one else.

Think of it. The Word, which had been present with God at the creation of the world, became flesh. And the world barely noticed. The world shrugged its shoulders.

I would say that if you are waiting for something big and spectacular, if you're thinking God's coming into your life is going to be a big and spectacular, then you don't understand who God is and how God works.

God came among us quietly. God still comes to us quietly.

And that's what this season of the year is for. To remember that.

So, pay attention. Pay attention as you have never paid attention before. Keep your eyes open. Be alert. Something is going to happen. Something may already be happening. It will when you least expect it.

The Savior of the world will come into your life.

And when that happens – this happens every time a baby is born – your life will never again be the same.