

The Sign of the Virgin

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on the 4th Sunday of Advent, December 20, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Years ago I was given a pamphlet: "Seven Cancer danger signs." I looked at it quickly and forgot all about it until about three years ago. I noticed a painful swelling. I ignored it for about a week and then I remembered that this is one of the seven danger signs. I was alarmed and went immediately to the doctor. It was cancer. "It's a good thing you didn't let this go any longer", the doctor told me. I had surgery and radiation. My doctor assures me that I'm one hundred percent cured and should have no fear of the cancer coming back. I'm glad I didn't ignore the signs.

I was talking to a man not long ago. He is ignoring one of the signs of cancer for months and months. "Why don't you get it checked out?" I urged him. "I'm afraid it might be cancer", he said. "But if it is", I answered, "Maybe something can be done. If you just ignore the problem it could get worse."

Too often we refuse to recognize danger signs. A teenage boy is becoming more and more dependent on alcohol but his parents ignore the signs. A young girl is ~~being~~ sexually abused by her father. Her mother says she had no idea what was going on. But the signs were there. She just couldn't bring herself to believe them.

Signs! They can save our lives. We ignore many signs at our own peril. That's what happened to King Ahaz. The year is 734 B.C. The Assyrian empire has begun to threaten the tiny independent countries of the Middle East. Syria and Ephraim, two tiny nations to the north of the kingdom of Judah, have joined together in a military coalition against Assyria, but Ahaz of Judah refuses to go along. So Syria and

Ephraim decide to overthrow the government of Ahaz and to put someone else on the throne in Jerusalem. King Ahaz and all of Jerusalem tremble like leaves on a tree as the enemy armies approach.

The prophet Isaiah goes to the king to assure him that God is with him. Ahaz was a descendant of the great King David. God had promised that the line of David would never fail. But Ahaz has trouble trusting the promise of God surrounded as he is by enemy armies. "Trust God's promise!" Isaiah urges. "Ask God for a sign to confirm his promise." ~~"If you don't trust God's promise, you'll be lost."~~

Well, King Ahaz didn't really want a sign from God because he had already decided to rely on Assyria to defend him rather than on the Lord. When Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, Isaiah really got ticked off. Isaiah addressed Ahaz and all the princes and princesses gathered in the royal palace. He said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (which means *God with us*)".

Perhaps Isaiah pointed to a young pregnant Jewish princess and said, "Unlike you, King Ahaz, that young woman trusts the promise of God so much that, despite the enemy armies surrounding us, she's going to name her child, Immanuel, God with us."

How do we know that God is with us? If we're really honest we have to admit that there aren't a whole lot of signs of God's presence with us in this world. Read the newspaper! Thousands of men, women and children will die this morning in Somalia because young armed gunmen rob food and fill their bellies while letting the weak and defenseless starve. In Bosnia, Christian Serbs attempt to exterminate

Moslem Bosnians to avenge ancient wrongs. Hundreds of Palestinians are deported from their home land which has been occupied by a hostile power for nearly fifty years. Bombs go off in London department stores killing Christmas shoppers. And closer to home, so many are dieing at such a young age of cancer, marriages are breaking up, crack cocaine, poverty, homelessness and unemployment are destroying us and demoralizing us.

What is the sign that God is with us? The Hollywood film makers want us to think that God speaks to us audibly with the voice of Charleston Heston. Military leaders tell us that victory in battle is a sign of God's presence. Some preachers will tell you that the signs of God's presence are religious experiences. Or we look for miracles. We pray and pray. We look for those who are terminally ill to be miraculously healed. That would be a sign of God's presence. We look for broken marriages to be miraculously fixed. We look for a world at war suddenly at peace. And, yes, we come to church with the hope of getting a warm, comfortable feeling but are often disapointed because it's easier to see some sign of God's presence in a beautiful sanctuary with stained glass windows than it is to see in a cold school auditorium.

But Isaiah points to the child of a young Jewish girl who believes God's promises and names her baby, Immanuel, even though her city is surrounded by a hostile army? Matthew refers to this passage in his Christmas story and translates the Hebrew word for *young woman* as *Virgin* following the lead of the Greek translation of Isaiah 7:14. Ask Matthew what the sign of God's presence is. With the whole Christian Church in every age, he points to Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary. He

is the sign that God is with us.

It's very easy to ignore this sign. It's not easy to see God in this homeless child. Imagine you were there that first Christmas. You see the face of Mary wracked with the pain of childbirth. You hear the cold night wind blowing outside the stable cave at Bethlehem. You see an anxious husband tending the birth of a son that isn't even his. There's the dust of straw, and the smell of animals and the blood of the afterbirth. There's nothing in that stable which could convince anyone that the Savior of the world is present. "God hides himself", Elizabeth Achtemeier writes, "God hides himself behind blood and flesh, and gives us no certain sign. His redeeming work among us is veiled in weakness and poverty and pain."

Karl Barth, the most profound theologian of the twentieth century, tells us, in one of his thick volumes, about a painting of the Nativity of Jesus he saw in Germany. In the background the viewer sees God in all his glory surrounded by angels but nobody in the picture ~~except the baby Jesus~~, sees God directly because they all have ^{None, that is, but the baby Jesus.} their backs turned to him? The baby Jesus looks ^{over his mother's shoulders,} far off into the distance, directly into the face of God who is looking tenderly at his beloved son. As the shepherds, Joseph and Mary look into the eyes of Jesus they see God reflected in the eyes of Jesus. That's what Christmas is all about. In Jesus, we see God as we see him nowhere else.

But Christmas is not just the birthday celebration of a Jewish baby who lived long ago. It's true that he really lived in Palestine nearly two thousand years ago and he really died a horrible death. But he also rose from the dead; he lives and is present with us now. The Virgin born son of Mary is God with us and for us now.

Jesus is God humbling himself in order to make himself known to us, to call us back to him, to reveal the full extent of his love towards us. Christianity doesn't teach that we have to climb a ladder into heaven in order to be with God - rather, it teaches that God has come down that ladder in order to be with us and for us. Jesus is the sign that God has a heart that bears and shares our sorrows. He is the sign that God takes our sin and misery upon himself and away from us. We would not know this about God apart from Jesus. Jesus is able to do this because he is not only human, but also *God*, the almighty Creator and Lord.

Do you believe this? Faith means much more than merely intellectual assent. I suppose most of us here in this ^{auditorium} ~~church~~ this morning theoretically accept the Christmas message, just as King Ahaz had a theoretical belief in the Lord and spoke respectfully to the Lord's prophet. But faith means that we look nowhere else than to Jesus of Nazareth as our only hope and our Savior. If the stock market falls, if your girl-friend shoots you down, if you lose your job, we look to Jesus as our hope and consolation and see that God is with us. Faith in Jesus Christ means that we value him and his word ^{and his sacraments or his people} more than anything else and in spite of anything else. Faith in him means that we trust God's word and promise even when we are surrounded by what seem to be insurmountable problems.

King Ahaz looked at the surrounding armies, ignored the sign God offered him, and would not trust God's promise. Isaiah sternly warned him that rejection would mean that "The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah - the king of Assyrian." We ignore Jesus, the sign that God gives us, also at great peril to

ourselves, to our families, and to our posterity, not because God is against us, but because God is with us and for us and will do whatever is necessary to get us to look to Christ and trust and obey him.

But I can't end on the note of warning. I must end with good news. I must end proclaiming the Gospel that God is with us sinners. God is with you and you and you. No one is excluded. Jesus is the sign that God was with us when we were conceived in our mother's womb. God with us when we were born and laid in our crib. God with us when we're confronted with life threatening diseases and events. God with us at the wedding feast. God with us in the valley of the shadow of death standing before a tomb. God with us when we feel forsaken by friends and God. We may try to avoid him, deny him, crucify him but, in Jesus, God remains with us and for us. Even if we make our own bed in hell, the Psalmist tells us, he is with us even there. ~~And we~~ could not know this good news apart from Jesus. He is the One whom we worship and celebrate at Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray: O God, by your prophet you promised a sign of your presence, a son called Immanuel. And in Jesus Christ you chose to live in our midst, taste our suffering, and feel our needs. He makes known your will, teaches your way, calls us to follow him, and saves his people from their sins. Open our eyes to see our need of Jesus. Free our wills to embrace Christ in faith. Enlighten our minds to know him. Open our hearts to prepare for him a place for him to live. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

References:

Elizabeth Achtemeier, The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel.
Karl Barth, Deliverance to the Captives.
Alistair McGrath, Understanding Jesus.