

Reading the Signs
Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25
December 23, 2007

Friday afternoon I smelled trouble. My car wouldn't start. I waited patiently for a few minutes and tried again. No luck! The engine turned over but then died. I finally pulled out the cell phone to call for help. One bar showed on my battery indicator – enough to make the one phone call I needed to make! A sign of hope! Help was on the way! The next sign of hope would be the big yellow tow truck finding its way through the parking garage to my rescue!

In the eighth century BC, King Ahaz of Judah smells trouble. The intelligence agency reported that his neighbors, Israel and Syria, are planning an attack on his country. Ahaz is afraid. He considers forming an alliance with Assyria, the mightiest power around at the time. The prophet Isaiah comes to offer him an alternative plan. Trust in God, who intends to deliver Jerusalem from conquest. In a very rare move, Ahaz is invited to ask God for a sign to assure him of God's intention. Ahaz refuses to request a sign.

Not one to turn away even from those who refuse him, God chooses a sign for Ahaz. God promises that a young woman will bear a son and name him Emmanuel, meaning, "God with us." Before the child is old enough to choose the cereal he likes and doesn't like, the land of Judah will be safe from its enemies, if only Ahaz will forge an alliance with God. Isaiah's foreign policy advice to Jerusalem's king is to rely on God alone rather than trusting in foreign powers.

Ahaz is skeptical of this proposal. "Bah humbug, why should I trust in a God that I can't even see? Besides, a child is too weak and vulnerable to secure my nation against our enemies. I'd be a fool not to partner with the most powerful and prestigious military force in the world." He refuses the sign of hope.

Joseph smells trouble. The woman to whom he is engaged comes to him with stunning news. She is pregnant, but they have not yet been married. When this news becomes public, Mary will be stoned for adultery. He does not want her to suffer such indignity. He decides to divorce her quietly; then the humiliation and blame will fall upon him. Before he can act upon his decision, he receives a message from God, encouraging him to proceed with the marriage and to embrace the child as his own, for this child is destined for greatness. Joseph trusts this sign of hope.

Ahaz and Joseph are both given signs offering them direction for their lives. One refuses to respond to the sign; the other follows the sign given. It is true that the signs given to Ahaz and Joseph are not as clear and direct as the big yellow tow truck that was a sign of hope for me. To trust the signs they are offered

requires far more than common sense. It requires an inner strength and a measure of faith. The direction they are led will not be an easy journey. There will still be challenges to overcome. However, the promise is that they will not be alone. God will be with them. That's the meaning of the sign, Emmanuel, "God with us."

We humans tend to long for direct guidance from God. We like specific signs, such as "Stop." "Do Not Enter." "Right turn only." "Take the freeway for 10 miles; take exit 45; turn left; first house on the right; enter through the blue door." But the messages we receive from God tend to be more ambiguous: a nudge; an intuition; an invitation to serve; a passion; a dream. Oftentimes the signs are more ordinary than extraordinary.

Storyteller John Shea suggests that there are two eyes of the soul. The right eye gazes on God and the left eye looks upon creation. Typically the right eye that peers into the eternal is the weakest and most unfocused. We tend to compartmentalize God, thinking that God is only one object among many. This understanding prevents us from full communion with the Divine Presence all around us.ⁱ

"Tell me," said the father to his son, "have you ever asked for that knowledge with which you can hear what cannot be heard, see what cannot be seen, and know what cannot be known?"

"Please sir, instruct me."

"So be it, my son. Put this salt in the water and come back tomorrow."

The son did so and returned the next morning. His father said, "Please return to me the salt you placed in the water yesterday."

The son looked but could not find it. "But sir, all the salt has dissolved."

"How does the water at the top taste?"

"Like salt."

"And at the middle?"

"Like salt."

"And at the bottom?"

"Like salt."

"My son, the salt remains in the water even though you do not see it; and though you do not see that Pure Being [God] is fully present in you and everywhere else."ⁱⁱ

As the salt permeates the water, the Divine Presence infuses our world, our lives, and our very beings. We need only cultivate our spiritual vision, to sharpen our focus so that we will notice the signs of hope given by God. We need to coordinate our gaze so that we see God in creation at one and the same time. "The ultimate goal of the spiritual life is to coordinate both eyes into a single

vision. This single vision, the working together of the two eyes of the soul, is often called the eye of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Chaim Potok suggests that “[A human being] sees only *between* the blinks of [the] eyes. He does not know what the world is like *during* the blinks. He sees the world in pieces, in fragments. But the Master of the Universe sees the world whole, unbroken. *That* world is good. Our seeing is broken...Can we make it like the seeing of God? Is that possible?”^{iv} Indeed it is possible, if like Joseph, we cultivate the ability to peer into the eternal and the created world with both eyes of the soul.

The sign given to Ahaz, to Joseph and to Mary, and to us is a child, a child named Emmanuel, God with us. Why a child? A child that survived infancy and childbirth would be expected to have a normal human lifespan. This human life with the name, Emmanuel, would be a constant reminder to those around him that “God is with us.” Children playing in the neighborhood and schoolyard would know a friend named, “God is with us.” Friends who passed him on the street would find themselves frequently saying, “God is with us.” Every time they run into him at the marketplace, people would think, “God is with us.” This human being will be a constant sign of God’s faithful presence in the ordinary circumstances of life, like the salt in water.

A child would experience all the joys and sorrows of life. He will intimately know the growing pains of children and teenagers. He will need to choose a vocation that uses his gifts and leads him to fulfillment. He will be exposed to the faith tradition of his culture and participate in insightful dialogue that challenges him to live that faith. He will know the difficulties of making a living under foreign occupation. He will face the challenge of relationships, dealing with difficult personalities and fickle friends.

This promised child will never be far removed from any human life, for we are united by our ability to feel and experience and express ourselves. He will forever be one with humankind, for he is one of us. And since he is “God with us,” God will forever be one with humankind.

When Joseph looked at Mary’s child, he gazed with both eyes of the soul, seeing both the divine and the human, the wondrous art of God and a child in need of care. When both eyes of the soul are open and alert, we recognize that the ordinary realities of life can be infused with extraordinary meaning. Instead of simply being caught in an awkward situation, Joseph experienced the opportunity of a lifetime. Life would not be without its crises, but he knew they would survive, for God indeed was present with them.

God’s best signs are ordinary enough to have on hand every day so that they keep reminding us of what they stand for. They are constantly recurring

mnemonic devices. You see a rainbow and remember the promise, “Never again will I destroy the earth.” You see the stars, and you recall, “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens.” You reach for the yeast, you pick up the broom to sweep the house, and you remember, “The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and hid in a measure of flour...the kingdom of God is like a woman who has lost a coin, and so sweeps out the whole house looking for it.” With this woman pregnant with child, God is instigating another sign, because now whenever we look at a pregnant woman, whenever we see a child, we will remember: “The child’s name is Emmanuel, God-with-us.”^v

When we look at a child with one eye on the eternal and the other on the created world, we will see not just a child in need of attention, we will also see a child of God. When we look with the eye of God, it changes the way we perceive anyone. We can’t help but observe them as a sacred and unique work of art created in the image of God. Reading the signs with the eye of God is a life-changing experience. It certainly changed Joseph’s life. In the midst of trouble, he experienced composure. In the face of anxiety, he knew peace. Joseph was attuned to God’s presence even while tending the urgent matters of daily life. With an eye on God and an eye on earth, he saw more clearly the vision of God and he gave his life to it.

You so enjoyed the piece from Robert Fulghum last week that I share another with you. He encourages us to see with the eye of God and the wonder of a child.

When Sam was 3 years old he attended the Little School of Seattle.
Which met in the basement of a church.
And kept its general supplies in the foyer of the women’s restroom.
Sam discovered this treasure trove one morning late in November.
Therein was a king-sized canister full of red glitter.
Yes.
Upside down over his head. All over the restroom.
And down the hall and around the corner and into the Director’s office.
But before anyone could mutter oh-my-goodness-what-a-mess,
Sam, 3, sang out – hands in the air, laughter on face,
“you know what?” – “YOU KNOW WHAT!”
“there’s CHRISTMAS in the BATHROOM!”

There’s Christmas in the bathroom.
And therein lies the message.
Beauty, so said the ancients, is in the eye of the beholder.
And Christmas is and ever will be found where it’s looked for.

Most often close by, most always very underfoot.

Hidden away in the cupboards of our lives waiting to be rediscovered in a rebirth of wonder –

Waiting to be dumped over our hard heads like blessing oil

Waiting to be scattered like red glitter on the walls and hallways of dark December.

Christmas will be found –

In closeted memories, visions, hopes, fears, half-forgotten songs and muddled stories of a child of long ago and in the story of a child named Sam.

Christmas will be found –

Even in bathrooms – by those who know how to see.^{vi}

May we read the signs of life with an eye fixed on God and an eye cast on the task, event, or person before us. May the signs of ordinary life point us toward the deeper meaning God has in store.

O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.

Light of Christ dawn in our darkness, shining in those dark crevasses of pain, grief, guilt, and grudges.

Prince of Peace, reign among us, enabling conflict to cease, warfare to end, and harmony to abide.

Emmanuel, God with Us, draw near to us once more, showing the pathway of wholesome relationship and compassionate living.

We confess that sometimes our vision is clouded and we fail to recognize your presence with us. Frequently we use blinders to keep you out of our lives. Sometimes we are fearful of what you may demand. Forgive us, O God. Help us cultivate attention to your movement in our lives. May we sense the signs you place all around us, reminding us that you indeed are with us.

We are grateful for family members and friends who embody love and grace in our lives, making your love visible. We praise you for communities of faith which model holy discipleship and help us to see your presence among us.

We praise you for the wonders of the seasons, and the promise that the dead of winter will awaken to the new life of springtime. We lift to your loving care who live in the winter of the spirit, suffering from loneliness, loss, and depression. Renew their hope and send them messengers to assure them of your abiding love....

ⁱ John Shea, *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), p. 20.

ⁱⁱ Quoted from the *Upanishads* by John Shea, *ibid*, pp. 20-21.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shea, p. 24.

^{iv} Chaim Potok, *The Gift of Asher Lev* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 100. Quoted by Shea, *ibid*, p. 24.

^v Anna Carter Florence, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XIX, No. 1, Dec. 2007, p. 33.

^{vi} Robert Fulghum, *Christmas Friarworks* (Morningstar Press, 1981).

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