

A Sign

Isaiah 7:10-16

Wayne Eberly
December 22, 2019

God gave Noah a sign. After the terrible flood that wiped out and washed away a world corrupted and filled with sin, God gave a sign so humans would know, “Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth. This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between you and me.” Many people see a rainbow emerge after a storm and their hearts return to the promise God made so many years ago and the sign of the rainbow, a sign of God’s promise to protect and preserve life.

God gave Jacob a sign. Running for his life, trying to escape his brother Esau who was intent on taking his life, Jacob laid down on the ground, in the middle of nowhere, feeling lost, feeling all alone, and feeling afraid. On that night of troubled sleep God gave Jacob a sign, a dream with a ladder resting on heaven and coming all the way down to earth. The ladder was filled with angels descending and ascending. But that wasn’t all. Above the ladder stood the Lord, and the Lord spoke words of comfort to Jacob, making promises to protect and preserve his life. The final words God spoke were, “I will not leave you...” God gave Jacob a sign, a ladder in a dream, and the sign signified that God would be with Jacob.

God gave Moses a sign. Out in the desert, far removed from his years of power in the palace of Pharaoh, Moses was out tending his flocks in the desert when he came upon a burning bush. So much was signified in the sign of the burning bush. The fiery bush was a sign that Moses was standing on holy ground. From the fiery bush God revealed the sacred name of Yahweh, I am who I am. The bush was a sign and symbol that God had a plan for Moses, and the plan was for Moses to lead the people out of slavery into the Promised Land. The sign of the burning bush revealed God’s deep and unfailing commitment to his people. “I have seen your suffering. I have heard your cries. I am concerned about your suffering. I have come down to help.”

God gives signs. In a world of confusion, a world where sin and unrighteousness turn everything topsy-turvy, in a world where people are scared and lonely and afraid, in a world where people are crushed under a heavy load, enslaved like the Hebrew children in Egypt, in a world where fear and uncertainty cast a deep and dark shadow, God gives signs.

This morning I asked Mary Slattery if she would sign during the sermon. Our church was blessed a few years ago by sign language. One Sunday Kathy Koziol was singing a beautiful song called, "El Shaddai." As always Kathy's face was glowing with the love of God and the song was filling our hearts with joy. But on this particular Sunday Kathy had asked Mary Slattery to sign the song she was singing. As Kathy sang and Mary signed, there was someone in the congregation who took the singing and the signing as a sign from God. Charlie Allen listened and watched, and when it was over, he felt like God had literally given him a sign. The woman living next to Charlie happened to be deaf. Her name is Phyllis. Charlie started asking questions of Phyllis and Mary, if I invited my friend to church, would you....and if my friend at church signed the service would you...and one day Phyllis was sitting in church and Mary was standing up front and our life as a church experienced a season of blessing. I'm so glad Charlie did not ignore the sign God gave him. The sign wasn't just for him. When Phyllis decided to join our church, she told our Session she had wanted to have a church where she could worship for nearly twenty years, but no church near her had sign language. The sign was not only for Charlie. The sign was for Phyllis. But it was also for Mary, who was able to use her amazing gift. Phyllis has moved away, and Charlie has passed away, but the impact of that sign and what it led Charlie to do has made a lasting impact on our congregation.

God gives signs, and those signs, signs like rainbows and heavenly ladders and burning bushes and signs that inspire someone to say, "I wonder if..." those signs can make a deep and lasting impact. At other times, it seems that as human beings we are given a sign, but we miss the deep and meaningful impact God intends for us to receive in the giving of the sign.

Isaiah 7 tells about a wonderful sign God gives to King Ahaz. Ahaz ruled God's people during a time of great unrest. Assyria was the dominant empire at the time, and Ahaz had aligned himself with the Assyrians. At the same time, some of the nearby kingdoms had made an alliance in opposition to Assyria, so they didn't like Ahaz being on the side of Assyria. These rivals gathered together for war. Ahaz intended to turn to Assyria for his support. It was at this moment that the prophet Isaiah came to Ahaz and told the king to trust in God, to let God be the deliverer, not the Assyrians. To show that God had the power to deliver King Ahaz, he told Ahaz to ask for a sign. Ahaz declined. By declining, it was a pretty clear sign Ahaz was not willing to put his trust in God. Ahaz declined a sign. God gave a sign anyway. "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel."

The word translated as virgin can also mean young woman. In no time at all a young woman has a son, and that sign, the young woman having a son was meant to convince King Ahaz to trust in God. Ahaz not only refused to ask for a sign, when the sign was given, for all we can tell, he refused to acknowledge the sign. Ahaz aligned himself not with the Lord, but with the Assyrians. If the sign God gave was meant to make an impact on King Ahaz, this particular sign was not very effective. Instead of trusting God Ahaz trusted the Assyrians.

Even as I say this sign was not effective in terms of how it impacted King Ahaz, it does not mean the sign was not effective at all. King Ahaz ruled God's people around 730 BCE. Sometime during his reign, the sign we have been focusing on was given to him, and he either ignored it or completely missed its meaning. The sign that was given to a king in 730 BCE became the sign that was given to a descendant of that king some 700 years later. The sign to Ahaz didn't make much of an impact on him. But when that same sign was given to the descendant of Ahaz, to the man we know as Joseph, who was engaged to be married to the woman we know as Mary, that same sign made a huge impact.

Hear, again, the beautiful story of the sign that was originally given to King Ahaz but is now given to Joseph. These words introduce the story.

“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet (Isaiah): The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’).

The sign, the virgin conceiving and giving birth to son, makes an impact on Joseph that changes the course of his life. Originally, he was going to put Mary away quietly, so as not to bring her public disgrace. Now with the sign to guide him, he charts a new course. “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”

If we judged how effective the sign was only by the impact it made on King Ahaz, the sign might seem to be a failure. If we judge the sign by the impact it made on Joseph, the sign had a powerful and lasting impact. This powerful and lasting impact was not only for Joseph. Our lives have been touched by this sign given so long ago. We believe the birth of Jesus was no ordinary birth. The Holy Spirit was at work in his conception. When we say we believe Jesus is the Son of God, we are trusting in this sign. When we trust in this sign, we are affirming that we believe the title Jesus bears is a title he deserves, and it is a title that brings us comfort and peace and hope and joy. The child born of the virgin shall be called

Immanuel, which means God with us. With the virgin birth the stage is set for Jesus to show us in ways that are awesome and amazing just what it means for our God to truly be with us. Ultimately the name Immanuel, God with us, will have a profound bearing on the name Jesus, which means God saves. In Jesus Christ God was with us and in Jesus Christ God has brought salvation.

King Ahaz didn't put much stock in the sign he was given. Signs are like that. Not everyone believes in the sign. I don't know how you feel about signs. I sure hope you are open to signs. When God sent Jesus Christ to live with us, when God took that name Immanuel and brought it to life in Jesus Christ, God was giving us a sign that he would always be with us, that he would always love us, and that his love for us was so great he would even give his own life for us. I hope you are open to that sign of God's desire to be your God, to be your Lord, to be your Savior, to be your King. I hope you are open to that sign of God's desire to be your Heavenly Father and for you to rest securely in the knowledge that you are God's beloved child.

Once God gave that sign to us, the sign of his great love through Jesus Christ, we might assume there would be no more need for signs. That is absolutely true. There is really is no need for any more signs. One of my favorite hymns puts it this way: **What more can be said than to you God hath said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?** With what God has done through Jesus, hasn't God done enough? Well, yes and no. Yes, the sign of Jesus is all we need. And yet in God's grace and mercy, God continues to give signs. Charlie was sitting in church listening to Kathy sing and watching Mary sign and he took it as a sign and for a wonderful season in the life of our church a woman who was deaf was able to receive the blessing of having a church home...and we shared in that blessing. And Charlie was not alone. Many time, countless times, people like Charlie, and people like you, and people like me receive signs from God. Like King Ahaz we probably miss a ton of God's signs. But like Charlie sometimes we see the sign and we understand God is still Immanuel, God is still with us.

Sometimes the sign we receive is like the rainbow, reminding us of God's promise to preserve and protect this world. Sometimes the sign we receive is like Jacob's Ladder, an assurance that God is with us and watching over us. Sometimes the sign calls us to action like Moses, who was sent to deliver the people from bondage. Sometimes the sign is like Gideon's fleece, a sign that helps us make a decision we are facing. Sometimes the sign just seems to be there to remind us that when we belong to God, we belong to God forever. Sometimes the sign just seems to remind us that God will never leave us and never forsake us. Sometimes the sign just seems to say that nothing in all creation will separate us from the love God has given through Jesus Christ. Sometimes the sign just seems to say that Jesus meant it when he said, "In my Father's House are many mansions, and I am going there to prepare a place for you."

A rainbow...a ladder...a burning bush...someone signing while someone else is singing...God gives signs. For some you have told me it is a butterfly...a bird...a song...a place...a special gift or keepsake...or something happens that could be a coincidence, but enough things happen enough times that you realize there are no coincidences...however it happens, and it happens in a hundred different ways, in God's goodness and in God's mercy we receive a sign that lets us know we are not alone, a sign that lets us know our God's name is still Immanuel, a sign that assures us our God is with us, and will always be with us.

Sometimes the sign is simply another person who God puts in our life at just the right time. My friend Tom wrote a story about visiting the American Cemetery and Memorial in Luxembourg. Tom went to the American Cemetery and Memorial in Luxembourg in 1990. He went there to visit the grave of his big brother Bill, who survived the Battle of the Bulge, only to be killed by an exploding shell in Germany in February of 1945. Tom's big brother Bill was 21 years old when he died in WWII. Tom says he shed tears that day at the cemetery. It is just a short story Tom tells about visiting his brother's grave, but the last paragraph describes the impact that visit had on Tom. Tom writes, "I was an 18-year-old in the Navy when Bill died and I had heard no eulogies, I had attended no memorial services, nor had I grieved in public for him. But as

I stood before his grave on that clear October morning those many years after his death and told him once again that I loved him and that I was proud of him, a turmoil in my heart was eased, a life fulfilled and a journey completed.”¹

Tom was 18 years old as WWII came to an end. When I met Tom, he was nearly sixty, and I was in my 30s. His friendship was such a gift. After I read the little story Tom wrote about visiting his brother’s grave in Luxembourg, and what an impact that visit had on him, I thought back on something else Tom told me. Tom told me about the day he received the news of his brother’s death. Tom was a wonderful writer, and he also wrote about what it was like the day he received notice of his brother’s death. Tom enlisted in the Navy in February of 1945. He had just turned 18 years old. He was in Boot Camp, learning the ropes of the military, taking his turn standing guard duty, spending a lot of time marching, learning how to survive on a perpetual lack of sleep. According to Tom it was actually a lot of fun, this new adventure of being in the Navy. He writes that was actually a lot of fun...until one fateful day. “Some memories of that day are crystal clear while others have faded with the passage of time. I sat on my bunk on a Sunday morning, opening mail from home. A letter from Dad simply and lovingly stated that my only brother had been killed in action in Europe. He was 21.”

Without being critical of the Navy, Tom writes that they provided no special means to cope with grief. I take that to mean that Tom received the letter that his brother died, and he was pretty much on his own to process that terrible and devastating news. I cannot even begin to imagine how Tom felt that day, a young man still in basic training with the Navy, sitting on his bunk bed, reading that his dear big brother had died, putting the letter down, and trying to figure out what to do next. And he writes, “The Navy provided no special means to cope with grief.” But that is not all Tom writes. “Since it was Sunday, we had time off. I told my buddy, Ron Mergenthaler, and he stayed with me for the day.” Tom wrote about Ron Mergenthaler in one of the books he wrote. But Tom also talked about Ron Mergenthaler. For Tom, the fact that Ron, another young guy in the

¹ Tom Potts, *Beauty of the Sunset*, 98-100.

Navy, knew enough to just stay by Tom's side that whole day, that was a sign to Tom that God was watching over him, that God was providing for him, that God was protecting him. That was a day Tom did not want to be alone. And God put Ron there, a young man who knew enough to stay right by Tom's side. Have you ever had a sign like that? Has God ever put a person in your life at just the right time, a person to stand by your side, a person to watch over you, a person to wait with you, a person to listen to you, a person to comfort you, a person to support you, a person to simply be with you? For many of us that is perhaps the greatest sign God has given, a person to be with us.

And I guess that is the most important thing I want to say today. When God gave the sign of the virgin being with child, what God wanted us to know was that God himself was with us. As real as a friend who stands by our side, who holds our hand, who wraps their arms around us, our God is with us. Name him Immanuel, which means God is with us. In a powerful way, from the first cry of the baby boy in the manger to his last cry on the cross, Jesus is God's gift to us, Jesus is the unmistakable sign that God is with us. God is always with us. God has always been with us. And God always will be with us. That is the deepest and truest and most powerful meaning of these words, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel."