

Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve 2019

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Nearly everywhere we go, there is a sign. They tell us important things. Signs along the roadway inform us of what direction to go or how many miles we have until we get there. They help guide us on our journey and keep us and others safe by indicating when to stop, slow down, or of a dangerous curve up ahead.

And then of course there are all those billboard advertisements and signs in front of businesses and organizations identifying who they are, what service they provide and perhaps something about their mission. At times, those signs may even make us laugh with a catchy phrase or one that has inadvertently been misspelled, misprinted or just not proof-read thoroughly. Some of the best ones come from reader boards in front of church buildings, such as a few I came across after a quick internet search:

- “Too cold to change the sign! Message inside.”
- “We are not Dairy Queen, but we have great Sundays.”

And a couple I pray are never displayed on our reader board:

- “Have trouble sleeping? We have sermons. Come hear one.”
- “Now is a good time to visit, our pastor is on vacation.”

Signs do say a lot about who we are. A brief walk around the church property and one will note many signs. For instance, in addition to worship times, our reader board states, “All are Welcome” making a claim that as the people of God we understand and hold firm God’s house and Christ’s church is open to all people regardless of race, creed, gender, political affiliation, social status, age, etc.

Or, there is the sign heading east along Main Street pointing people to our location that, in addition to our name, also identifies us as part of the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, thus, making the statement we don't exist for ourselves; but rather we are connected to something larger, the body of Christ, together at work in the world responding to the grace of God in carrying out God's mission.

Or, two days ago we had signs posted outside stating, "Free Meal this Sunday". This, along with the sign just inside the main doors from the parking lot that states, "Donations for West Branch Food Pantry" or the sign in the hallway sitting atop a shelving unit full of quilts that states, "Comfort Quilts Please feel free to take a quilt and give it to someone who may need uplifting or comforting" are expressions of our baptismal calling to celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ and spread the glorious light of his love with the world.

Or how about the sign high above our worship space that states, "The Master is here and calleth thee." That sign makes a theological claim that when the church gathers, God in Christ comes among us; which is the essence of what tonight is all about. It's the root of our rejoicing and the heart of the hope encountered each Christmas Eve. The gospel of Matthew states, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." (Matthew 1:23 NRSV) On this holy night all those years ago, the invisible God did a miraculous new thing in becoming visible in the form of a tiny, vulnerable, flesh and blood baby boy born in a remote, out-of-the way village in the humble surroundings of a shelter designed for the families livestock. A stark contrast to the palaces in which Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, governor of Syria, named at the beginning of tonight's gospel certainly resided in.

God too is in the sign business; however, God's sign isn't found on a post alongside a roadway or outside the doors of a church building or surrounded by flashing neon lights. No, as the angel told the shepherds, keeping watch over their flock by night:

*"This will be a sign for you:
you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."*

Years ago, while on internship, a gentleman came up to me after Christmas Eve worship. I noticed him sitting by himself in one of the back pews. I didn't recall ever seeing the man before but as it was Christmas Eve and many unfamiliar faces were in attendance, I didn't think too much about it. However, as others exited, I could see he lingered around to be the last one through the line on his way out the door and into the wintry darkness of the night. A few folks made small talk with him, but finally as I shook the last hand he stepped forward, took my hand, leaned in and softly said, "You know I came here tonight looking for a sign." He then paused. I fought the urge to break into the awkward silence with some sort of follow-up question. After a few moments, he proceeded onward stating, "It's been rough for me. You know I was baptized in this church many, many years ago. But I haven't been here since the funeral." He paused briefly and then went on, "My wife died years ago. Bad car accident. Maybe you heard about it." (I had not.) "It's never been the same since. Christmas seems to be the most difficult time of year. I kind of gave up on God after the accident. Didn't understand why he didn't protect her. Why did she have to die? Why did he leave me all alone?" Again, a brief pause before he continued. "I've lost hope. But for some reason, I came tonight. Looking for a sign." I gave a bit of space and finally said a word, "And..." He responded, "I realized I was looking for a sign in all the wrong places. I thought it would be something grand. I thought it would be something I could find on my own. I thought God was high above me and even at times against me. Yet, tonight for the first time in my life I feel as if God found me. I felt surrounded by the angels as if God were swaddling me in his arms." He was stumbling a bit to express what he was experiencing but despite this I could catch a glimmer of hope begin to shine in his eyes, a spark of excitement in his voice and like the shepherds upon finding that beautiful sign of Christmas lying in the manger an eagerness to tell the story of the true Sign he encountered that night. After a few more minutes of discussion, it was clear to me that Christmas Eve night the Spirit of God broke through the hardness of this man's heart, shined light into the darkness that had engulfed him following his wife's tragic and sudden death, and comforted the pain which had tormented him every day since. For whatever reason on that night he saw the sign the shepherds had seen. He saw the sign given for the world. He saw God was not high above the heavens, nor against him. Rather, he saw God was with him. Wrapped in swaddling clothes in a feed trough. Then, he gave me a sign of just what this night means as he concluded, "I still miss her. Always will. But something seems different. I don't feel quite as alone as I did before. Not sure how to explain it to you."

He didn't need to explain it any further. The light of the Christmas miracle made its home in that man's heart and led him out into the darkness of the night shining new light for his eyes to see the God of hope was indeed near.

*"This will be a sign for you:
you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."*

Signs do indeed say a lot, tell us important things, inform us of what direction to go and guide us on our journey. The Sign that cried from the manger that dark starry night years ago and brought light into that darkness is our sign. It is the worlds sign telling the story of just how great God's love is for all God created. It is here tonight. Do you see it? Hear it? Feel it? It's the sign of good news of great joy for all the people. For born this day in the city of David is our Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord rescuing us from sin. Let us join the shepherds in making known all we have seen, felt, heard and experienced through the goodness of this gift and with the great multitude of heavenly host praise God and say, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"