

Sign of Hope

sermon digest

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Isaiah 7:14-16; Matthew 1:18-25

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Can you read the signs? While most of us are thankful that the construction traffic jams in our part of town have come to an end, some of us have discovered that the street signs are missing. In spite of absolutely perfect directions, coming from the west, my brother missed the turn at Nebraska Avenue and phoned from the middle of town for new directions. Without street signs, "Turn on Nebraska Avenue" is meaningless to out-of-town guests. Hey! Signs are important. In navigation they point us in the right direction. The bits and pieces of information in the chaos of the moment often come together to form a complete picture of the world we live in. Apparently insignificant events can become keys to understanding the time in which we live.

Advent always pops up amid the confusion of the Thanksgiving holiday and the hoopla over "black Friday." The national news is the same every year—panning shopping lines in the stores and interviews of people in the malls with their bargain bags. Pundits analyze the cash register reports; this year they added satellite pictures of parking lots. Always the underlying message is the economic sign of a growing or declining economy. A radio cacophony of "To Grandmother's House," "Jingle Bells," "White Christmas," and "Rudolph" reminds us that the calendar has turned toward Christmas and winter and the end of 2010 and the beginning of another year. If you don't think this qualifies as the most chaotic time of the year, talk to the Moyers. With a house full of family, their hot water heater blew, and John was scrambling yesterday to locate an available plumber, someone not at the shopping center on Black Friday.

At this time of year, pastors are known to complain about the crass materialism and the secular exploitation of the holy as they try to turn heads away from the moment to eternity, away from the material to the spiritual, away from the political to the theological. The church is often portrayed as an island of peace in the storm of the world, but a close reading of the Gospels discovers Advent in about the same chaotic mess in the Jewish world of the first century. It is a time of economic privation, of political upheaval, of military rule, of petty politicians, and of challenge to community values and the struggle with a family scandal. David Garland (*Reading Matthew*), notes that Matthew begins with the genealogy of Joseph before turning to the scandalous discovery of Mary's pregnancy. Despite the translations, the word "birth" does not appear in Matthew 1:18. Matthew repeats a word from 1:1, "genealogy." There is no birth narrative here, only the scandal of an illicit conception—at least, illicit from Joseph's perspective. The word might best be translated the "advent" of Jesus the Messiah. This is background information about the coming of the one named Jesus. It is best explained in Matthew from Joseph's perspective, with Joseph's family tree; and the advent, the coming of Jesus, who by the time of the writing of Matthew's Gospel has already been confirmed by followers as the Messiah of God. Advent then is much like Advent comes to us every year in the midst of family, personal, and political chaos, in the confusing mess of empty ritual and random events.

The fragments of real life are confusing. The pregnancy of Mary is not exactly good news to Joseph. By law, Mary deserves to be stoned to death along with her mystery lover, but Joseph is a "righteous man." He is going to swallow his pain and humiliation and break off the engagement quietly to give Mary a chance to find her way through the mess. But at the moment of his resolution to do the right, the righteous, thing, he encounters a totally different interpretation of the scandal. In a dream (Joseph in Genesis and in Matthew are prone to dream) an angel appears to call him away from his anxiety—"do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

At Baylor University I was among a elite company of pre-ministerial students. With credentials from our home church documenting qualification as potential ministers, we were allowed membership in the Ministerial Alliance and for a required minor in religion, we could get a discount on tuition. We could be very holy on occasions, but together in a dorm room we could be as secular as the pre-law or business majors. On occasions we were known to listen to the religious broadcasts on radio from Del Rio, Texas. The radio provided some comic relief from the serious business of biblical studies. One particular woman evangelist was fun to hear mostly because the very idea of a woman

preacher was hilarious where we came from. But word got out all over campus one evening when she announced that she was pregnant—by the Holy Spirit no less. The irony here was a group of young men most of whom were ready to defend the honor of Mary the mother of Jesus to the death totally insensitive to the plight of the woman on the radio, and without an ounce of respect for her explanation.

Why would the community of Mary and Joseph be any more believing or respectful of their explanation? In the first century, Justin Martyr, an early Christian apologist wrote a *Dialogue with Trypho*, a conversation with a Jew named Trypho about Jesus. In the first century, Trypho raises the same issues about the story in Matthew that became a firestorm of controversy over the first publication of the Revised Standard translation of the Bible in 1952. Trypho argues that the text of Isaiah 7:14 speaks of a “young woman,” not a virgin, and that the baby in question is Hezekiah. The oracle in Isaiah is about people and events well known in Jewish history and cannot apply to the birth of Jesus. He further argues that virgin births are common in Greek mythology and that the stories are obviously copied from pagan sources.

God brings meaning out of the chaos of life. The author of Matthew's Gospel was probably fully aware of the Jewish history surrounding the oracle in Isaiah and even of the meaning of the Jewish word that he carried over into Greek to mean “virgin.” But the author took this as the sign Emmanuel, God with us, and read the word of a totally different epoch in Jewish history into the meaning of events in the coming of Jesus. We can wage a war of words until the Second Advent without ever coming to complete agreement on the historical, biological, scientific value of the virgin birth in Matthew and Luke. But even the Roman Catholic priest Raymond Brown recognizes that the early creeds affirming the virgin birth of Jesus were not concerned with biology. In the spirit of Advent, they were looking for the meaning of Jesus.

My maternal grandmother was a giant in my childhood memory. She was the matriarch in total control of her husband and her nine surviving children and all of her grandchildren, I might add. She was a Bible scholar who was the central authority on all Bible questions for me until I moved on to a professional level of biblical study. In spite of our long-standing differences of opinion about matters like evolution, I still respect Grandmother's intellect. In her last years of life, she loved to work crossword puzzles just to keep her mind alert. I recall a summer visit when I was invited to join her in the assembly of a jigsaw puzzle on her dining table. At first it seemed like a fun pastime, but I soon grew weary of trying to find places where the bits and pieces of color fit in the structure and was off to play with my cousins in the cow pasture. I later was amazed at the finished product. She put the pieces together into a meaningful whole and framed the finished art for everyone to enjoy. I could never envision the whole picture that for her was an obsession. Until she presented a finished product, all that I could see was fragments on the dining table. I think that is the message of Matthew in the coming of Jesus. We need to back off from the scattered bits and pieces of words about Jesus in the Gospels in order to begin to grasp the whole picture.

Can you read the signs? The story is from the perspective of Joseph, but it is not really about Joseph. In fact, Joseph is little more than a prop on the stage of history whose entire meaning in life is centered in the life and ministry of his son Jesus. He disappears from view early in the pages of the Gospels, and Jesus is called the son of Mary. By the death of Jesus, only Mary is left to grieve the suffering of her son.

The story is about Jesus, but only as his life unfolds into the redemptive work of the Christ. The birth of the Messiah in the Gospels is gathered in light of the whole story. In fact, if the Gospels were presented in chronological order, we would have to begin at the end. Every page of the story is viewed through the window of Easter.

Finally Advent is about God. The baby gets two names, Jesus and Emmanuel. He is called by what he does—Jesus/Savior and Emmanuel/God with us. Can you read the signs? You have to look behind the words and beyond the fragmented events to see the hand of God in history opening the vista of meaning. The baby is God with us, a sign of hope for the whole world and the whole of history.