

# The Sign of a Baby

sermon digest

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Isaiah 7:10-16

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You may have heard about it last year. A project with several starts and stops and surrounded by more than a little controversy, it finally came to completion in early November as cranes lifted the final pieces into place. The project: possibly the world's tallest statue of Jesus. A full 33 meters high, it represents a meter for each year Jesus may have lived, although we are actually not sure how many years he did live. A crown atop his head adds another three meters for good measure, rounding the statue out at 39.6 meters (a fraction short of 130 feet). Another statue of Jesus, the Cristo de la Concordia, in Bolivia, measures .8 meter higher, putting the Polish statue's claim to fame in jeopardy. If the 12 foot mound beneath the statue is added, however, the Polish statue wins hands down.

Like most projects of this nature (remember the debate closer to home over the effort to build huge crosses alongside the interstate?), the Polish Jesus has been surrounded by controversy. Government authorities questioned its stability and safety. At one point, a skeptical bishop, sensitive perhaps not only to the cost, but also the derision arising from an increasingly secular society, put a halt to the project. Some locals voiced dismay. "I don't understand," one resident complained. "With all this money, we would have done better to build an elementary school." Others, however, voiced hope that the statue would be an economic boom, bringing tourists to the area, which would certainly make it okay [<http://news.sky.com/home/world-news/article/15796591>].

The project may be "useful" (as in "profitable"), but will it accomplish the purpose for which it was raised? Will it give answer to the growing secularization of Poland, which so disturbs its originator, 79 year old Catholic priest Sylwester Zawadzki? Church attendance in the country has fallen to 40 percent in rural areas and 20 percent in the metro areas. Interviewed about why they do not go to church, non-churchgoers charge the church with irrelevance, being focused on issues like contraception, hypocrisy in light of the sex scandals and being too aligned with the political party that has just lost power. Reading about the swirling debate from the vantage point of the United States, United Church of Christ minister, Tom Wier observes, "It doesn't matter how big that statue is, these folks are not coming back to mass. It may be a reassuring and inspiring symbol to those who are engaged in the church, but the symbol doesn't overcome the disassociation many Polish people feel" ["God with Us," [BloomingCactus.com](http://BloomingCactus.com), 12/18/10].

You may have read the article on the front page of Thursday's *Oak Ridger* about the controversy brewing in Santa Monica over the displacement of nativity scenes in Palisades Park. The location for the past 57 years of 14 nativity scenes and a menorah or two, the park this year was subjected to a lottery in an effort to fairly distribute spaces among the numerous groups making requests. Atheists won the lottery and in keeping with the rules, requested 9 spaces each. Three spaces were left for Christians and Jews. Although many of the captured spaces were left empty, the assault launched against all religions in a couple of the spaces is a far cry from representing peace on earth and certainly from building a community of openness and acceptance of neighbors. More than just a "Happy Solstice," one exhibit, proclaims "Religions are all alike—founded upon fables and mythologies—Thomas Jefferson." Another depicts pictures of King Neptune, Jesus Christ, Santa and Satan and proudly boasts, "A Million Americans know MYTHS when they see them. What myths do you see?"

Arrogance in the name of religion is offensive, whether it is their religion, our religion or nonreligion. The challenge in the Santa Monica situation and in the brouhahas that ensue every year around Christmas presents us with an opportunity to think about the appropriate place of religious symbols in communities of increasing diversity—yes. But it does more than that. It pushes us to think seriously about the deep meaning of our faith. It is an opportunity to do more than just get mad at those who challenge us, and it is certainly an opportunity to do more than to just secularize our faith to make it little more than a national icon on the level of Santa Claus. It is an opportunity to go deeper, to seek to recapture the awe and mystery of what we proclaim. It is an opportunity to look within ourselves and ask what sort of signals are we giving to those around us concerning who this God is who comes in Christ and how this coming informs everything we are and do. Or, to be perfectly frank, does it? For if it does not, it doesn't matter how much noise we make or how many spaces in the public square we win. It's just a hollow victory.

**What are the signs of God's coming?** The question is not new. It presents itself in every time and place faith finds life. Step back three millennia—yes, three. We're moving back 150 years beyond the Isaiah of the Exile to the Isaiah of the 8<sup>th</sup> century—the Isaiah who spent some 40 years warning against Judah's erring ways and calling her to repent. This tiny little kingdom is caught in a vise. Assyria's powerful Tiglath

Pileser is on the move, threatening Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel, who have formed an alliance. Judah's King Ahaz, now insulated from Assyria's murderous ways by the two kingdoms to its north, refuses to join the alliance and faces the consequential threat of its two angry neighbors. What to do? Ahaz, not one to sit still, contemplates a preemptory alliance with Assyria—an alliance the prophet vociferously opposes, an alliance that will be something on the order of jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Rather than putting his trust in a ruthless foreign power, Ahaz, the prophet will urge again and again, should put his faith in God. Rather than arming himself to the teeth and trusting in horses and chariots, Ahaz, the prophet makes clear, should pay attention to his people, who are daily victimized by the powerful and wealthy.

Anything but passive, Ahaz begins his search. Quietly investigating allegiance to Assyria, he also consults the astrologers, soothsayers and fortune tellers. Just in case, he puts an idol of a serpent in the temple and restarts the practice of human sacrifices to the gods. No stone is left unturned, except one: Isaiah's call to trust God and govern his people with equity. Ahaz feigns piety when the prophet encourages him to ask God for a sign of what he should do: "I will not put God to the test!" Why? Perhaps he had already made his decision, one he knew would make neither God nor Isaiah happy. Or maybe he was fearful of the demands such a sign might put upon him. Signs from soothsayers and fortune tellers are fine, but signs from God can extract a lifetime of faithful response.

God will give you a sign whether you want one or not, Isaiah assures Ahaz, and there it is. See the woman pregnant with child? Before the child that she bears is weaned, Israel and Syria, themselves over run by Assyria, will no longer be a threat. Good news! But going beyond today's passage to the verses immediately following, Assyria with whom Ahaz seeks to align himself, will turn on him as well—hard news, but important for Ahaz to know.

This baby, called Immanuel, God with us, is God's sign. Like Ahaz, we may long for a close up, surer sign—a short cut around the day to day task of faithful living. We want assurances about the future, and we want them now! There are assurances, Isaiah says over and over again. The assurances are just this: serve God and govern the people with equity: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:16-17). Therein is evidence of God's presence. Short of this, Isaiah says, there are no guarantees.

**God comes in surprising ways with equally surprising results.** "The Lord himself will give you a sign," Isaiah tells Ahaz." Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (7:14). Can you imagine Ahaz's inner response? Certain that he did not want a sign from God in the first place, the poor frightened Ahaz on hearing the prophet's words must have felt his reservations more than justified. "A baby? A baby? Isn't that just like God! What I need with Assyria breathing down my neck, is a good army, not a baby!"

Three millennia later, we, too, look to the birth of a baby. What a surprising way for God to come among us. Yet, is it? Have we not encountered this surprising, unpredictable aspect of who God is at every step along the way? "This is often," William Willimon insists, "the way God loves us: with gifts we thought we didn't need, which transform us into people we don't necessarily want to be."

With our advanced degrees, armies, government programs, material comforts and self-fulfillment techniques, we assume that religion is about giving a little . . . in order to confirm to ourselves that we are indeed as self-sufficient as we claim. Then this stranger comes to us, blesses us with a gift, and calls us to see ourselves as we are -- empty-handed recipients of a gracious God who, rather than leave us to our own devices, gave us a baby [Christian Century, 1988, p. 1173].

Immanuel, God with us, you see, is not about winning the culture wars, nor is it about being apologetic about who we are as if our very believing is an embarrassment. It is about encountering in the quiet grace of this small, unassuming gift a power that changes everything we ever thought about God, about ourselves and about the world. It is not about winning the competition and forcing the world to utter "uncle" before our religious displays. It is about day to day faithfulness that speaks for itself. It is about having encountered grace and becoming a gracious people, particularly to the oppressed, the orphan, the widow, the refugee—those and particularly those our world would prefer to push aside.

This year Bread for the World released Christmas cards that frankly took my breath away. One pictures an Afghanistani woman on the back of a donkey, making her way to the nearest hospital three hours away with her husband walking by her side with their small child. The other is a picture of a woman praying in

Kashmir with her small son in her lap. In both instances, the veils and traditional dress and the physical features of those pictured are heavily reminiscent of the Arabic people of our own day. In both instances, I find myself moved to note the similarity between these people of my own time and the mother, father and child of 2000 years ago, whom we honor this season. In both instances, my fears and prejudices are put on hold, and I am reminded of the one who is there "in the least of these."

The sign of Immanuel? The sign that God is with us? Look to the child. Look to those hurting around us and know yourself so freed by the grace of God in Christ that you have grace and more grace to spare.