

Signs Of The Times

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When I was a senior in college I was struggling with what to do with my life. I had spent pretty much my teenage years lauding the fact that I was not going into the family business. Everybody in my family was a pastor and I was bound and determined to show them I was my own man. So Political Science was the major I picked with every intention of pursuing government service of some kind. It was the way I thought I could best serve God. But the hound of heaven had other ideas in mind and as I entered my senior year an interest in the church began to grow in me. I fought it, of course, at every turn – the stubborn pride of a young man in his early twenties trying to differentiate himself from the family is a powerful force – nevertheless I felt at home in the church and a voice in the back of my mind grew louder and louder to say – Steve, you belong in the Church. It was at about that time that the political organization at my college of which I served as chairperson was hosting a United States Senator, Mark Hatfield from Oregon, to speak to the college community. It was big deal for me to host Senator Hatfield – he had been a political hero of mine for quite some time. And before his speech I was given a few minutes alone with him to talk. He was very interested in what we were doing there on campus and curious about what I was considering doing after college (I had this hidden hope that he might offer me a job) – but then I made a mistake. I told him that I was struggling with my call to service – and I wasn't sure whether God was calling me to serve the government or to serve the Church. And then he said to me, "I know you're not asking my advice, but if I were you I would test first the call to the Church. Government will always be there. But test first the call to the Church." Well, there went my job offer!!! But what also went were those

words into the center of my soul. I don't know why – but that conversation for me became a fateful conversation. A tipping point. I took those words to heart – and tested first the call to the church and have never looked back.

Senator Hatfield never learned how important those words were. He never could have imagined that night that a third of a century later the young man would look back and count those words pregnant with future meaning.

In Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 7 – the lesson we just read – the prophet is before King Ahaz, the King of Israel and Israel is being threatened. The prophet challenges the king to ask for a sign from God. But the King refuses. He says it's not right to challenge God to present a sign. So the prophet speaks for God and says, "OK – even though you won't ask for a sign – God is going to give you one anyway. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel." Now the prophet, as he does throughout, speaks to his times. The King is to look for a sign in those days – and the sign is to be a young woman with child, bearing a son and naming him Immanuel. We don't know who this ended up to be in the times of Ahaz – but that was the sign he was to look for. But who was to know in those days that Isaiah's sixth century BC words were pregnant (excuse the term) with future meaning. Six centuries later a virgin is with child and bears a son and names him Emmanuel – which means God with us. Matthew the storywriter looks back and remembers that fateful conversation between prophet and king and hears words pregnant with future meaning – and sees them in the story of Bethlehem. The sign of those times, was to be the sign for these times.

150 years ago this year an embattled President takes a half-day train ride to a back woods town in Central Pennsylvania which fatefully had hosted three days of brutal war leaving scores of thousands wounded and killed. He was to dedicate a cemetery. That was all. He was to follow in the program the silver-tongued orator of the times whose speech would last two hours! Two hours! 13,607 words! Now you don't feel so bad about my sermons. The beleaguered President after applauding stands at the podium and with no benefit of microphone – reads his speech of 270 words. "Four score and seven years ago ..." How was he to know what those words might really

mean? How was he to know that they would be etched in marble and in the minds of millions of American school children? They pointed to the signs of those times and the signs of our times.

The Advent characters were most certainly sign pointers. Sign pointers and sign watchers. Zechariah takes his turn to offer the sacrifice in the temple – and the message comes that his barren Elizabeth will bear a child. How can this be? And he is given a sign – his speech will be taken from him. And now he knows.

Young virgin Mary receives an unexpected visit from an angel named Gabriel. And the angel tells her that she will conceive in her womb and bear a son and name him Jesus. And Mary asks the obvious question: How can this be since I have no husband? And the angel says, Look for the sign – your cousin Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived. The one who was called barren is six months along.

Joseph gets the word that his teenage betrothed is with child through no help from him. And he decides to quietly and gentlemanly divorce her – but then comes a dream and an angel and the words, Be not afraid. And he sees in them a sign that somehow he is to stick around and take Mary as his wife. And name the child to be – Emmanuel.

The angels sing Glory to God in the highest and point the shepherds to nearby Bethlehem to find the child born to them – the Savior who is Christ the Lord. “And this will be a sign for you – you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. A manger? Yes, a manger. Because it is a sign.

Wise men from the east notice an unusual star in the night sky and they are not sure what to make of it except that it must be some sign. Some celestial sign. And they trust their gut to follow it – because that is what you do with signs – you follow them.

That is, of course, if you see them. And that may be the question – do we see them?

Because that is something about the Advent characters – they looked for the signs. Strange visitors became angels. Unusual anatomical happenings became the power of the Most High. Messages left in dreams became the word of God. Quirky heavenly movements became stars to follow. Do you see what I'm saying? If anything can be said about the Advent characters it is that they left room in their world for God to say something, for God to do something, for God to show a sign. You see, we too eagerly leave ourselves off the hook when we read the advent story and say – lucky them, they got real signs! Angels and unexpected pregnancies and dreams and falling stars!! We want God to do the same thing again. But God doesn't do the same thing again. God never does the same thing again. Behold, God says and is always saying – Behold I am doing a new thing.

Is it possible that God is filling the world with new signs – that the multitude of the heavenly host is filling the heavens and the earth – that signs are appearing before our very eyes but we don't see them? So busy are we looking for the old signs that we don't see the new signs. The modern world so enamored with human ingenuity has gotten so small that God has no room to move, to act, to speak? We seem to have a small answer for just about everything that we forget that maybe God has some big things to say to us. Lord knows Joseph could have chalked up that strange dream of a talking angel to the onions he ate the night before – but he didn't. The world was bigger than that – it had room for God to speak, to move, to act.

Is your world big enough for God to speak, to move, to act? Are you leaving yourself open to the possibility that signs might be about? Maybe in the simplest of things. That God is trying to say something – if only to announce that he is Emmanuel – God with us ... in the now, in the present, in the times?... Even in the simplest of things.

Annie Dillard in her great book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* muses for us about the time she spent at a simple creek outside of Roanoke, Virginia. All she did in her strolls to and beside the creek is watch. And to look for the signs. Watch inside a world that was big enough for God to speak. At one point she pauses before one section of the brook and writes:

It is sheer coincidence that my hunk of the creek is strewn with boulders. I never merited this grace, that when I face upstream I scent the virgin breath of mountains, I feel a spray of mist on my cheeks and lips, I hear a ceaseless splash and susurrus, a sound of water not merely poured smoothly down air to fill a steady pool, but tumbling live about, over, under, around, between, through an intricate speckling of rock. It is sheer coincidence that upstream from me the creek's bed is ridged in horizontal croppings of sandstone. I never merited this grace, that when I face upstream I see the light on the water careening towards me, inevitably, freely, down a graded series of terraces like the balanced winged platforms on an infinite, inexhaustible font. "Ho, (she quotes from Isaiah) if you are thirsty, come down to the water; ho, if you are hungry, come and sit and eat." This is the present, at last... This is the now, this flickering, broken light, this air that the wind of the future presses down my throat, pumping me buoyant and giddy with praise.

My God, I look at the creek. It is the answer to Merton's prayer, "Give us time!"

Time to see the signs. Time to see a world big enough for God to speak, to act, to move and to beckon us into the divine presence. For this is what happens to the characters of Christmas – because the world is filled with the possibility that God might be up to something – when they see the sign ... and hear the sign ... they consider the possibility that God might be wanting them for something. God might be wanting them for something. God is up to something and he has me in mind for a part.

Might that be true for you? That God is up to something ... and he has you in mind for a part? A story that includes a teenage virgin and a senior citizen bearing a child – would suggest to us that no one in this room is exempt from playing a part – if only we would see the signs? Are you seeing the signs? Is the world big enough for God to show up and despite your circumstance still say something?

Years ago Life magazine did a little spread where they asked a bunch of different people to write about the meaning of life. The meaning of life. They asked celebrities, authors, statesmen to

reflect on this question. They also asked an eleven-year-old boy named Jason Gaes, a cancer victim, about the meaning of life and this is what he had to say:

Why are we born was a really hard paper to write. I think God made us each born for a different reason. If God gives you a great voice maybe he wants you to sing. Or else if God makes you 7 feet tall maybe he wants you to play for the Lakers or the Celtics. When my friend Kim died from her cancer I asked my Mom if god was going to make Kim die when she was only 6 why did he make her born at all. But my Mom said even though she was only 6 she changed people's lives. What that means is like her brother or sister could be the scientist that discovers the cure for cancer and they decided to do that because of Kim. And like me too. I used to wonder why did God pick on me and give me cancer. Maybe it was because he wanted me to be a dr. who takes care of kids with cancer so when they say, "Dr. Jason, I get so scared" or "you don't know how weird it is to be the only bald kid in your whole school." And I can say, "Oh yes I do. I had cancer and look at all my hair now.

Signs of the time, we might say. In a world big enough for God to speak, to act, to move and to invite us in some way, some small way, to take our part in the divine presence.