

"An Unlikely Sign"

Luke 2:8-14

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This week, a rather rare event is about to occur. In fact, the last time such an event took place was on March 4, 1226, almost eight hundred years ago. Between December 16 and December 25th, Christmas Day, the two largest planets in our solar system--Jupiter and Saturn—will line up and be in almost perfect conjunction with one another. Together, they will look like a double planet, separated by less than the width of a full moon. Back in 1614, the German astronomer Johannes Kepler suggested that the alignment of these two planets may have been what was referred to as the “Star of Bethlehem” in our Nativity story although many scholars remain skeptical that such an event actually took place.

The Star of Bethlehem (also called the “Christmas Star,”) appears only Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus, where “wise men from the East” (Magi) are inspired by the star to travel- first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem in search of the one born “King of the Jews.” The star acts for them as a giant GPS, guiding them to the exact spot where the child lay. Having located the babe, they worship him and present him with gifts before returning home by another route. WITHOUT such a sign, those Magi—astrologers from Persia—would NEVER have found the child they so ardently sought.

In fact, without ANY sign posts to guide us, we’d ALL be lost- we’d never have any idea of where we are or where we are going. Case in point: In my last year of seminary, I received a phone call from a member of the Bodega Bay Presbyterian Church asking me if I could come and preach the upcoming Sunday for them. I told them I’d be delighted. Bodega Bay was a small beautiful seaside community just north of San Francisco made famous for serving as the backdrop to Alfred Hitchcock’s movie “The Birds” which he directed in the early 60’s. When Sunday came, my roommate and I left an extra hour early so that we could tour the town and enjoy some of the ocean sights. When we had driven as far as the coast, we reached the main highway where we had to make a decision whether to turn north or south. We stopped to ask a man walking beside the road if he knew the way to Bodega Bay and he said, “Oh sure. Just make a right here and continue north for about twenty miles. You’ll come right to it.” We made that right and for the next half-hour, proceeded exactly as the fellow had directed us.

At some point, however, it dawned on us that we were traveling in the WRONG direction, that Bodega Bay was not to the north of us- but rather to the SOUTH! (You have to remember that there were no cellphones back then, hence no Google Maps to rely on for directions.) The fact was that he had given us faulty information and by my account, there was no way we were going to make that service on time. We hastily made a U-turn and put the “pedal to the metal” as they like to say. Forty-five minutes later, we pulled into the town and drove right up to the church- a half-hour late. A man was sitting on the steps smoking a cigarette. He saw us stop, jumped up, and excitedly exclaimed, “You the preacher!” “I am,” I said. “Well hurry on in. We just got done singing ‘The Old Rugged Cross’ eight times trying

to stall for time!” I made a beeline up those stairs, right into the church, straight into to the pulpit, to make one of the most dramatic entrances those parishioners had ever seen. And just as I was about to settle in, I could hear one congregant in the front row mutter to himself, “Thank God! If I had to sing that damn hymn one more time, I was gonna turn Roman Catholic!”

Sometimes it’s not the directions nor the signage that’s the problem. One time, while living in California, I drove up to Berkeley to see a friend of mine who was then attending the university there. He was staying at the International House, a large dormitory on campus that accommodated many of the foreign students. Once I found myself in the center of the city, I pulled into a gas station and asked the station attendant for directions to the International House. “Sure, you’re not that far away,” he said. “Just head down this street three blocks and then make your first right and you’ll be in the parking lot.” Well I thanked him and drove off- following his directions to the letter. I drove down the street three blocks and made the first right- only to end up in the parking lot of the International House of Pancakes. Not quite the same thing.

We often fail to recognize just how important signs are. We usually complain that there's far too many of them around, that they clutter up the landscape and scenery- and they DO. One of the enduring legacies of former First Lady Lady Bird Johnson was that she helped promote the Highway Beautification Act. Nicknamed "Lady Bird's Bill," it sought to beautify the nation's highway system by limiting billboards and by planting roadside areas. But the truth is that there would be terrible chaos if we had to live without them. You see, "signs" tell us where we are, where we have come from and where we're going. Imagine a stranger trying to find our worship service if they had no knowledge of the area around Deer Creek or Pleasant Unity, if they didn't have Google Maps to help guide them here- they'd be just as lost and confused as I was the first time I tried to locate either of these two churches!

Well let's take this a step further. Imagine if there were no speed limit signs or no warning signs on the road such as "Merging Traffic Up Ahead" or "Slow Down. Dangerous Curve"- we'd probably all be dead within a year from automobile accidents. Then imagine if there were no street names or house numbers to go by. You'd never know where someone lived and so you could never mail any letters or Christmas cards to people- nobody would know where they are to be sent or from where they have come.

Take it one step even FUTHER and imagine there were no names, PERIOD- you would have no identity WHATSOEVER. People wouldn't know who they were talking to or which person was being talked about. They wouldn't know which country they were citizens of, which state they paid taxes to, which town they lived in. There would be no store signs so no one would know where or for whom they worked. People wouldn't know their families or friends or even know THEMSELVES. There wouldn't be any points of reference for anyone, thus leading to total anarchy with everyone walking in a kind of darkness, that is, if there were no signs or names to identify things or persons by.

Our text this morning concerns the importance of signs and directions. We're told that a group of poor shepherds were “keeping watch over their flock by night.” Since it was late, the sheep were all bedded down for the night while the shepherds remained huddled around a small

cackling fire to ward off the cool night air- all was calm and all was bright just as the carol says.

Suddenly there appeared in their midst a strange figure- it was the Angel of the Lord. Luke tells us that in that instant, the glory of the Lord shone around those shepherders meaning that in that instant, they all experienced a profound sense of the presence of God. As a result, they were filled with a great and holy fear. Then the announcement was made that would bring great joy to all people, the news that a Savior was being born that night in the city of David. It was the long-awaited Christ whom the Lord had promised centuries before. It was the great hope of Israel- that of a mighty Deliverer who would rescue them from Roman oppression and make them a great nation once again. He would issue in a whole new age of peace and prosperity unlike the world had ever seen. This person was at last making his entrance into the world as he who embodied their fondest hopes and dreams had finally arrived!

But the angel wanted to do more than just leave them jumping up and down with joy at this wonderful news- he had GREATER things in mind for them. He wanted them to go to the place where this event was occurring so that they might afterwards serve as GOD'S WITNESSES. They would see this child born in the back of a one-car garage, the rear of an old tool shed, and be filled with such awe and excitement that afterwards, they would have to rush back and tell the others of what they had seen. Their joy would be SO great that they would not be able to CONTAIN it!

However, in order for them to get to where the angel wanted them to go, he had to add a parenthetical piece of information- he had to tell them EXACTLY WHERE they would find this child: "And this will be a SIGN for you; you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." This messenger of God had to draw for them a road map in order to help them locate the Savior for WITHOUT that map, WITHOUT that sign to guide them, they would NEVER have found him.

Now as I read this text for the umpteenth time, I tried to contrast my own reaction to that of those poor shepherds. I mean had I been present there that night when the Angel of the Lord appeared with this wonderful news, I can see myself saying to the others, "Quick, let's rush off to the Royal Palace in Jerusalem. There, we shall SURELY find this child who has just been born king of the Jews! After all, wouldn't that be the most LOGICAL place for kings to be found- at the PALACE!" However, had we gone there, to our surprise, we would NEVER have found him for we would have discovered that God does not come among his people in the guise of a great king nor live in the comfort of a stately palace.

After failing to find him there, I would have then said, "Let us run swiftly to the Great Temple where the priests and religious leaders can be found. Surely, if the long-awaited promise of the Jews was now being fulfilled, THEY would be the very first to know." But after rushing over to the Temple, to that great center of civic and religious life and finding it totally dark and locked up for the night, we would sadly have to continue our search elsewhere.

I would then probably suggest that we rush off to the great university, to the halls of higher learning where the nation's wisest individuals inhabited. Certainly, were such a great person to enter their city, it would be the TEACHERS--those in command of the world's greatest

wisdom and learning—that should know of it. But again, as we had found at the king’s palace and the Great Temple, the Savior would not be found THERE, EITHER.

Well, since the Son of God was not born in the Royal Palace or the Great Temple or even within the ivy-covered halls of one of Israel’s distinguished universities, I might have then guessed that his birth had taken place at one of her great military installations, at an impregnable fortress like Masada where Israel’s finest military generals were assembled and her formidable armies remained on high alert. Certainly, if he was to be a great military leader, he would then have to be trained from his earliest years on in the art of warfare. But ALAS, as I’d discovered with the OTHERS, the long-awaited Messiah was not there EITHER, that instead of a MIGHTY WARRIOR, our Messiah would confound EVERYONE by ruling as a “PRINCE OF PEACE.”

Well it’s now becoming apparent WHY the angel of the Lord had to qualify his announcement to this group of shepherds, WHY it was necessary to give them specific directions in the form of this sign--a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. You see, WITHOUT such a sign, they would NEVER have found him; they would have missed him ENTIRELY! WITHOUT a sign, they would NEVER have recognized God’s promise fulfilled as an infant. WITHOUT a sign, they would NEVER have seen their Savior in an animal shelter, lying in a feeding trough for this is NOT the way great men make their entrance into the world. Why it DEFIES all custom and protocol; it CONTRADICTS all logic and commonsense. Only a sign FROM GOD could have enabled those lowly shepherders to ever find their Savior.

Well the GOOD NEWS is that in the Christmas story, God DID enter our world in human flesh and he gave us a ROAD MAP, a "SIGN" in which to FIND him- a baby born in a lowly cattle stall- THAT is where God was to be found. One would need a sign to find God there because without it, we would have looked everywhere else BUT in that manger. WITHOUT a sign from God, we would have missed our Savior ENTIRELY. But the sign doesn’t end THERE- after stooping so low as to become an infant, he humbled himself FURTHER by living among us, shouldering our problems, healing our afflictions, making the lonely and unloved persons in this world feel accepted, and ultimately dying the death of a common criminal with our trespasses and sins nailed into his body- all because he LOVED us. Let there be no doubt: Jesus Christ, through his HUMANITY, his HUMILITY, and his SACRIFICE does INDEED become the DEFINITIVE SIGN of God’s great LOVE for us.

In Matthew 12, Jesus was approached by certain Scribes and Pharisees who demanded from him a “sign” in order to prove once and for all that he was who he claimed he was- their long-anticipated Messiah. His answer to them was, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” In other words, any proof as to being the Son of God would rest not merely in his teachings (which they rejected) nor by any of the miracles they had witnessed him perform (which they still denied). He knew that nothing would ever convince the scribes and Pharisees, that instead of PROOFS, they were only seeking more AMMUNITION to use against Him. Just prior to this, Jesus had given them proof by healing a deaf man who was

possessed of a demon. But rather than believe, they accused Jesus of doing this by the power of Satan. Therefore, seeing their hardness of heart, he refused to give them any FURTHER proof of his identity. However, he DID say that there would be one OTHER sign forthcoming- his RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD and this would be their FINAL opportunity to be convinced. And yet these men even refused to believe HIS RESURRECTION and, as a consequence, their hearts remained darkened and they missed the coming of their long-awaited Messiah ENTIRELY.

Let me close by saying that, even for Christians, WE TOO can miss God's sign. Back in the mid-80's, I drove from central New Jersey to Pleasantville, Pennsylvania--a little town north of here--to meet with the pastoral search committee there. When the interview was over, they asked if I had any questions. I said, "Yes, I do" and politely inquired why it was that Pleasantville had so many "For Sale" signs around town. Their response, in all honesty, was, "What signs? We don't see any signs. There are no homes presently for sale in Pleasantville." The reality is that when you live somewhere and drive past the same homes day after day, it's easy to become oblivious to such things as "For Sale" signs- the fact is that you don't WANT to see them. But for someone arriving for the FIRST TIME, it was the very first thing I noticed as I drove into town. There seemed to be "For Sale" signs EVERYWHERE, but with fresh eyes, I could see things more OBJECTIVELY than they could.

Likewise, we can be so familiar with the Christmas story after immersing ourselves in it year after year that we TOO become totally OBLIVIOUS to the sign he has given us, without which we would not be able to FIND or RECOGNIZE him. God doesn't come to us high and lifted up, but lowly like a servant. We don't find him among the rich and powerful, the learned and the influential, but in the company of the poor and the outcasts of society, those in desperate need of love, acceptance and self-worth. We don't find God strolling down the avenues in triumph but crucified upon a cross of shame.

Yes, without a sign we would NEVER recognize God among the lowly of society, precisely where our pride, our self-righteousness, our learning and sophistication will not ALLOW us to find him. We must become, NOT like the kings and magistrates, NOT like the high priests and leaders of the synagogue, NOT like the all-wise professors, and NOT like the generals with their great military prowess but like the SIMPLE SHEPHERDS, humble and helpless before that babe, and in this way, WE, in turn, shall become a sign TO OTHERS, helping people out of their OWN blindness, offering them desperately-needed guidance in an otherwise dark and directionless world. Let us pray...

Our Heavenly Father and Everlasting God, you have given us a sign to direct us to the greatest gift of all- a babe wrapped in swaddling cloth. But because we exalt earthly honors over heavenly recognition, because we elevate worldly knowledge over divine wisdom, because we trust in the letter of the Law more than freedom in the Spirit, and because we rely on armies and weapons more than your own prescription for peace, we have grown blind and stumble around in the darkness. Lord, give us a humble heart and a gentle spirit that we might recognize the sign you have ALREADY provided us, the one which ALONE can guide us into all peace and truth and love- the sign of Christ in a cradle and Christ on a cross. In his name we pray, Amen.