

Restoration
December 18, 2016 Advent IV

Isaiah 7: 10-16
Matthew 1: 18-25

And the sign said "Long-haired freaky people need not apply"
So I tucked my hair up under my hat and I went in to ask him why
He said "You look like a fine upstanding young man, I think you'll do"
So I took off my hat, I said "Imagine that. Huh! Me workin' for you!"
Whoa-oh-oh

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign
Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?

And the sign said anybody caught trespassin' would be shot on sight
So I jumped on the fence and-a yelled at the house, "Hey! What gives you the right?"
"To put up a fence to keep me out or to keep mother nature in"
"If God was here he'd tell you to your face, Man, you're some kinda sinner"

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign
Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?

Now, hey you, mister, can't you read?
You've got to have a shirt and tie to get a seat
You can't even watch, no you can't eat
You ain't supposed to be here
The sign said you got to have a membership card to get inside

And the sign said, "Everybody welcome. Come in, kneel down and pray"
But when they passed around the plate at the end of it all, I didn't have a penny to pay
So I got me a pen and a paper and I made up my own little sign
I said, "Thank you, Lord, for thinkin' 'bout me. I'm alive and doin' fine."

So sang the Five Man Electrical Band, a Canadian rock group back in the 1970's. Signs are all around us. Sometimes they're straightforward and clear.



Other times they're more subtle and you have to read the fine print at the bottom to get the message.



I saw this one the just the other day that you can post next to your front door.



Some signs show a sense of humour, although the motorists may not find them funny.



And sometimes the humour is unintentional.



There's plenty of these on the web, just Google "crazy signs" and you can waste a whole morning looking at them. Signs give us clues as to what lies ahead, or direction. In the Bible signs are often something material that has a spiritual meaning and the passage in Isaiah is one of those occasions.

We know the quote that Matthew uses, but I wonder how many of us know the context in which Isaiah talks about this sign of a young woman giving birth to a son named Immanuel. King Ahaz, of Judah, was worried. Two other kings had formed an alliance and were threatening Jerusalem. His advisors were urging him to also make an alliance with Assyria in order to have a strong enough military force to defend the city.

But Isaiah, the prophet, argued against such an alliance and told king Ahaz not to fear, but rather to rely on God. In fact, Isaiah said, the two threatening powers will themselves be defeated and turn into nothing. Judah, if they trust in God, will not only survive, but will thrive. But only if they trust in God. Indeed, Isaiah says, "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all." (7:9)

To show you that I mean this, ask for a sign, God said to Ahaz. But Ahaz, in a rather self-serving response said that he didn't want to trouble God by asking for a sign, to which God replies, "Give me a break, you think it's too much to ask for something as trivial as a sign? In that case, I'll just go ahead and give you one anyway."

¹⁴"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman^[a] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.^[b] ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. ¹⁷The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria." (Is. 7: 14-17 NRSV)

A child as a sign that God was indeed with the people of Judah and they need not fear the invading armies. Of course we know that Ahaz didn't pay attention to the sign, and the consequences were just like when we don't pay attention to signs.

Now we don't know what child was born as a sign for Ahaz. It may have been a child born to him, the most likely possibility, or it may have been a child born to Isaiah, although shortly after this passage Isaiah is told he too will have a son and it is given one of those long Biblical names that also means something.

But Matthew, as he was writing his gospel recalled Isaiah's words and saw the birth of Jesus as another sign. Matthew portrays Jesus throughout his gospel as a fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies and portrays Jesus as a king who would restore the kingdom of David. So his genealogy at the beginning of the gospel draws attention particularly to King David as an ancestor of Jesus, and Joseph is also called a "son of David."

So how is a baby a sign of a restored kingdom? Especially to the people that Matthew was writing to, a people under the oppressive thumb of the Romans who were threatening all those who would not concede to the emperor worship that was being demanded. Indeed, the very existence of the new Christian community was under threat. And yet, here was an infant named Jesus, or Joshua in Hebrew, who would "save his people from their sins" and restore the kingdom of David.

Now infants can be seen as a number of different signs. They are a sign of new life and the continuation of a history and heritage. In many cultures children are seen as a sign of hope for the future. This is particularly true in places where infant mortality is high. Children are sometimes seen as a sign of prosperity, the more land you have the more children you need to help work the land.

But perhaps we should see Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as a sign of restoration in light of Isaiah's original message to King Ahaz. While the people of Jesus' and Matthew's day were looking for a restored kingdom to overthrow the Roman oppressors, Jesus came as a sign that that restoration would not happen by military might or by alliances with other nations, but rather through reliance on God. They, and we, are reminded that in Jesus, God is with us and therefore we need not fear.

"Do not be afraid" is a phrase repeated over and over again throughout the scriptures, and particularly in the accounts of Jesus' birth. Even Joseph is told to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. God with us, even in the face of death, means we need not fear. And the kingdom of God, we believe, is one that was ushered in by an infant, a helpless, dependant baby who symbolized the need to trust in God.

It is a message we need to be reminded of again and again. The sign of God's presence was not a mighty warrior that appeared as part of a conquering army, nor was it some super-hero come to save the day, but as a baby, to remind us that God is with us, Immanuel. A sign that God's way is different than our human way of thinking and that our trust must continue to be in the God who came in the form of an infant. As Berrigan paraphrased Isaiah's message to Ahaz, "Hold on to the Lord, no other lifeline will hold." (Cited in Friesen [Isaiah](#) p.68)

Signs are important to pay attention to. May we pay attention to the sign of Immanuel, God with us.

Let us join in a prayer of confession as projected:

L: *God of restoration,*

P: we yearn to walk in your way
but often choose our own path of turmoil and pain.

Save us, Lord,
from the pride and foolishness of choosing our own course,
that we may humbly and confidently
follow your lead,
through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Words of assurance

*L: Throughout the tumult of life,
God holds you close in love.
Rejoice,
because God's wisdom is your guide,
God's compassion is your strength.
God's love is your redemption.*

ALL: Come, let us walk in the way of God's heart!

A hymn that celebrates the birth of Jesus as a sign of hope is #189 To us a child of hope is born