

**CHRISTMAS EVE 2009**  
**“HERE’S YOUR SIGN”**  
**LUKE 2:1-20**

Well, it’s finally here! Christmas has arrived. The signs are everywhere, and everything is in place. When I was a little boy, the signs I looked for, that told me Christmas was close, were presents; more presents meant Christmas was getting closer. First, the tree went up--sometime around the first or second week of December. Of course, the tree was mostly a prop--a place for the presents to be laid. Day by day, more presents would show up under the tree. While Mom was fixing supper, when no one was looking, I would pilfer through the boxes and bags to see what was there for me. And if I was sure no one was looking, I would take the box and hold it up to my head and shake it good: if it moved a lot, probably socks; if it moved a little and felt light, probably pants or a shirt; if it was heavy and didn’t move at all--then it was something really good. Those were the signs of Christmas I looked for as a child.

The shepherds, who ran to the manger on the first Christmas long ago, were looking for a sign. They had out in the field, sleeping in the dirt with one eye open to make sure that none of the sheep wandered off and no wolves came out for a late night snack. Suddenly, in the corner of their eyes, they saw something--and soon the whole field was lit up, and an angel stood in front of them, and scared them to death. But the angel said, “Do Not be Afraid!--this is good news! In the little town of Bethlehem, in the ancient city of David, a baby is born tonight--the Savior God promised to send.” And then, the angel gave them the sign--“You will find a baby, wrapped in bands of cloth, and lying in a manger.”

Now this was a strange sign. It doesn’t seem strange to us, because we’ve heard about it for so long. But it was strange to them--even back then, babies weren’t born in stables and swaddled in feed troughs. This was unusual, and unbelievable--especially if what the angel said was true. How could the Savior sent from God be born in such humiliation? The shepherds had to check this out. As I ruminated on this text, I noticed that when the angels left, the shepherds didn’t say a word about what the angels announced--they didn’t mention the promised Prince of Peace, Shoot of Jesse, Great King. Instead, they said to one another, “Let’s go see this thing--this sign--that the angels talked about!”

And so they took off running, over the hills and through the woods, to Bethlehem they went, racing through the streets, dodging the carts and donkeys and crowds, poking their head into every stable and barn looking for a feed trough with a child. Finally, they saw a barn with a big crowd around it, and they hurried over and worked their way to the front--and there it was: their sign. A baby wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger. When they saw it, they told everyone about what the angels had said--that this child is the Savior, the promised Messiah.

The shepherds went running to see a sign because they needed a sign to believe the good news. And we’re not very different--we need a sign. Beyond the presents that tell us that Christmas is here, we need a sign that tells us God is here? What is our sign? What sign tells us that God is present in our world--that we live in God and God lives in us. Because sometimes--and ironically often at this time of year--it can seem like God is very, very far away. You can hear it in the Christmas songs that wish for peace and goodwill--for no

more lives torn apart, and wars that never start, and time that heals all hearts. We need God here, to be present with us, and we need a sign to believe that it's true. We can't run to the manger--the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes is not there anymore. The child the shepherds saw grew up. He grew up, and he died on a cross and rose from the grave to be our Savior. The Christ who was born in the manger now sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty--praying for you and me. So what's our sign that God is present with us?

It's this: love. Our sign is the love that we see shared between one person and another. John says, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." Love is our sign that God is with us. And you know, it's not too different from the sign that the shepherds saw: they saw the son that God so loved the world that he gave; they saw the child that Mary so loved that she birthed and wrapped in bands of cloth. They saw love in action--and that is our sign too.

Where can we see love? Well, let's start close by, with the people who are around us right now. Every one of you has come here with family and friends, with people you love and who love you. The love of family and friends is a sign that God is present in our lives. How have you been loved by the people with you in this room this year? By the people on the pew next to you? Caitlin and I have been so loved by this congregation this year, it is unbelievable to us. In the last four months, every time we've turned around, we been loved in some way--a card, a gift, a hug, an encouraging word. It has been a sign to us that God is present here in our lives in this place.

Moving outside of these walls, I think of our community. There is so much that is shared in this town and this area: love for those who are hurting and grieving, love for those who are in need, love for those who are hungry. Our Food Pantry has been overflowing this year: every time I turn around, I hear of someone else in the community who is giving to the Food Pantry. We came out of Galasso's a couple weeks ago and I saw a sign on the window that a business in town is collecting food for our Food Pantry--I had no idea. That is love, and it tells us that God is present in this place.

And going just a little further, I think of a church in the town of Brattleboro, Vermont. This story was on the news the other night--you may have seen it too. It's a small church, the First Baptist Church. In recent years the church, like so many others, has been declining in members and struggling for funds. But they have kept their ministry alive--in particular they host an emergency homeless shelter in the cold winter months, from Thanksgiving until Spring. In the current economy, the homeless in Vermont have been increasing, and state shelters are full; this church's shelter and food are critical for the people in their area.

Recently, the church made a heart-wrenching decision. They voted to sell their most prized possession: a Tiffany stained-glass window that had been shining in the choir loft for 100 years with the image of St. John the Divine. Selling that window is breaking their hearts, and the last I heard they've been receiving more and more donations as their story has gotten out. But what impresses me about this story is not whether they sell the window: what impresses me is their decision to sell it.

Because their decision reflects this truth: the sign of God's presence in their lives is not the image of the window, but the action of their love. Their love toward the homeless in

their midst is the sign that God is present in that place. It is a sign to all of us that God is present in our world.

The the shepherds believed that God was truly present when they saw the sign, the child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying a feed trough; they told everyone their good news, and then they went back to their fields and their sheep. But you know, they were not the same--for they had seen the sign, and believed, and they returned with joy and hope.

In a few moments, you and I will head back to our homes, and before long to our jobs and our everyday lives. O God, may we not return the same. Give us the eyes of faith, to see the signs of your presence around us, to see the love around us, and believe in the one who was born in manger, and now reigns with you and the Holy Spirit forevermore. May we, with the shepherds, return to our homes with joy and hope, having seen your salvation.

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