

The Gift of a Sign

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Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel...”

Those words open a hymn often sung during the Season of Advent as it speaks of our longing that the Messiah will soon appear. The name Emmanuel—which is spelled with an “i” in the Old Testament and an “e” in the New—is an ancient name of the Promised One for whom Jews still wait and one who Christians trust has already come and will return. In my family, the moniker “Emmanuel” has additional meaning as it is the more formal name for our oldest granddaughter, too. Thus, in multiple settings it is a name that evokes hope and joy for the present and future, which makes the response on the day it was first heard so striking.

Our Old Testament reading recalls that moment. Isaiah, the prophet of God has gone to Ahaz, the king of Judah. That ruler, feeling threatened by two countries was considering an alliance with another nation when Isaiah appears. “Ask a sign of the LORD your God,” the prophet says, “let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” Isaiah is giving the king a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—to name whatever sign from God would reassure him with the implication that whatever is asked, God will grant. Despite that offer, Ahaz replies “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.” We might have heard that response as one of great humility and piety, had not Isaiah gone on to say, “Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?” Thus, it’s with exasperation that Isaiah declares “the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.”

When heard from a Christian perspective, those words are usually interpreted as pointing ahead to the One who would be born in Bethlehem centuries later. Much of that association arises from our New Testament reading which recalls the night when Joseph—Mary’s betrothed—is visited by an angel who explains to that troubled man the events behind her pregnancy. “The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit,” the messenger reveals. “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus,

for he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew goes on to offer the first in a pattern found elsewhere in his gospel of connecting Old Testament words to the life of Jesus and in this case, he misquotes Isaiah in writing “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” Thus, for Christians ever since, the name Emmanuel has been linked with Jesus.

I have no trouble affirming that the prophet’s words anticipate that the One who was born to save. Still, one of the wonderful things about Scripture is how the same passage can be faithfully interpreted in other ways, too. So, on this morning I’d like for us to resist jumping ahead to our typical conclusion about Immanuel and consider another message.

When open to that possibility, I think we could all agree it would have been of little comfort for Ahaz to hear of a child who would be born 700 years later. That Judean king was struggling with what he should do right then in the face of foreign threats, so to hear of a savior to come centuries in the future would have offered no reassurance. Thus, most scholars believe that both Isaiah and Ahaz understood the message of Immanuel to describe something that had already occurred—namely, that a young woman known to the king was pregnant. “Look,” he says, “the young woman is with child and shall bear a son.” There has been all kinds of speculation about who was the woman and child of whom Isaiah spoke, but their identity is not as critical as the reassurance the prophet was seeking to offer. “Before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good,” he says, “the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.” In other words, that peace will come before the child is very old.

It was a word intended to provide reassurance, yet it didn’t have that kind of effect. For after Isaiah speaks of Immanuel Ahaz goes out and makes a deal with Assyria, continuing events that will result in the eventual capture of Jerusalem years later. Thus, the sign of Immanuel proved to be of little

comfort to the king, perhaps because Ahaz thought it unremarkable. That's too bad, as signs of God's activity have often come amidst everyday events.

As part of a sabbatical a few years ago, I went to see a pastor friend named Herb. Now living in Guelph, Canada, he had been Associate Pastor of the NC congregation I left for seminary in 1983. The Shelby Presbyterian Church and my office with the Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company were separated by a one-way street. Despite the congregation's proximity and the fact that I had been active in Presbyterian churches for my entire life, for the first six months in Shelby, I did not attend a worship service.

One day, as I was leaving work, this man I did not know walked over toward me. It turned out to be Herb who introduced himself and asked if I could give him a ride to get his car from the repair shop. He looked harmless enough, so I agreed to help. As I dropped him off a few minutes later, he invited me to visit their church sometime. That was all I needed to start worshipping there. Don't ever underestimate the power of a personal invitation! I began to attend weekly and soon joined. My experience there played an essential role in discerning my call to ministry.

Herb left the church about a year after I joined it, completing some advanced degree in Toronto. We had not seen each other in the intervening years, and thus my primary reason for tracking him down was to thank him for asking me for that ride several decades earlier. On hearing the story, he smiled and said, "You know, I don't remember that at all!"

We then got caught up on what had been happening in our lives, including our respective ministries. He told me of some health challenges he had faced, including a heart attack at age 48. He then shared another frightening episode when, gradually, his vocal cords had frozen up.

Despite seeking early treatment, it reached the place where he could no longer speak and had to write out everything he wanted to convey. After further testing, he was told it was cancer that required surgery yet warned even if all went well, he might never talk again.

On the day of the surgery, Herb told me of how he was waiting in his hospital bed and prayed. “Lord, I want to preach!” Upon opening his eyes, Herb’s surgeon—who it turned out was also a Presbyterian--was standing there. “Before we go to the operating room,” he said, “let me scope you one more time.” When he did, the physician discovered that it was not cancer after all, but a severe infection. It soon cleared up never to return.

Was that last look a sign of God’s work? Herb certainly understood it that way, even though many of the story’s details--disease and treatment and uncertainty--happen every day. Others could have gone through the same events and chosen to see no evidence of divine involvement at all. Such seems to have been the conclusion a king of long ago reached.

We aren’t told why Ahaz ignored the sign of Immanuel, but I can’t help but wonder if it was because the birth of a child was too ordinary. Maybe that king wanted something like a voice from a burning bush or a parting of the Red Sea given to his ancestors. The fact that he even refused to ask for a sign, though, makes me wonder if he had already made up his mind about forming the alliance and didn’t want to be dissuaded by anything God offered. We aren’t told.

Yet what is clear is that the sign Ahaz ignored could have given him just the reassurance needed if only he had understood its intent. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown writes, “The sign offered by Isaiah was not centered on the manner in which the child would be conceived, but in the providential timing whereby a child who would be a sign of God’s presence with His people was to be born precisely when that people’s fortunes had reached their nadir.” (Brown, Raymond E. *The Birth*

of the Messiah, Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1979, p. 149) In other words, that the sign of God's activity often comes when human beings need it most and often amidst ordinary events.

Several Decembers ago, Randy Heiss was hiking on a remote expanse of land behind his ranch in Patagonia, Arizona, a town near the U.S./Mexico border, when he spotted in the grass a balloon or at least the remnants of one. He walked over to pick up the latex pieces and throw them away, but then noticed that the balloon's string was attached to a piece of paper. "Dayami," it read on one side in a child's handwriting, accompanied by a hand-drawn bow. He flipped the paper over and saw a numbered list, all in Spanish.

"My Spanish isn't very good," Heiss said later, "but I could see it was a Christmas list." He was charmed and suspected a child had tried to send Santa Claus a wish list by balloon, something he had done as a kid himself. No one had ever returned a letter he had sent, and so he decided he would try to find the child who had sent this one. It would be difficult, of course, but he had a few clues. About 20 miles to the southwest, just over the border, was Nogales, Mexico. "Based on the prevailing wind," he commented, "I was pretty doggone sure that's where it came from." He took the note home to his wife, who is fluent in Spanish, and determined that Dayami had asked for Enchantimals, clothes, art supplies, and slime, among other things. Heiss posted about his quest online, hoping one of his friends in Nogales might know the child's family. A few days passed with no response, so he sent a private message to Radio EXNY, a station in Nogales. Someone called him right back. His wife explained the situation to radio host Cesar Barron, who then talked about the quest on air and the station's Facebook page.

A couple of days later, Heiss got a message from Radio EXNY: they had located Dayami, an 8-year-old-girl, and her family who indeed lived in Nogales. Would they be willing to arrange a get-together at the radio

station? Heiss and his wife immediately went shopping and bought just about everything on the list and a few other toys, as Dayami had a younger sister, too. They drove 45 minutes and arrived at the station with presents by the armload, soon meeting two very excited little girls. The parents explained that Dayami had been writing a letter to Santa and sending it by balloon for years, but this was the first time anyone had found her note. “Their eyes were wide open with wonder,” Heiss said of the sisters. Not wanting to spoil the sense of amazement, Heiss and his wife told them they were “ayudantes de Santa,” or Santa’s helpers.

“It was a beautiful, beautiful experience,” Heiss said before adding “Quite healing for us.” Nine years earlier the two of them had lost their only child, a son. They have no grandchildren. “Being around children at Christmastime has been absent in our lives,” he said. “It’s been a kind of gaping hole in our Christmas experience.” He reflected on the miracle it was that he spotted the balloon at all, let alone how he was able to locate Dayami and her family. “We now have friends for life,” he said “And, for a day, that border fence with its concertina wire melted away.” (Wang, Amy B. “A girl in Mexico attached her Christmas list to a balloon. A man across the border found it.”

www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2018/12/21)

A balloon with a Christmas list. A last-minute diagnosis. An expectant young woman. They are all ordinary events that can occur without any sense of wonder or faith or reassurance arising within us. Yet Advent invites us to look upon the circumstances of our days with different eyes, so that when the time is right, we, too, will recognize signs of Immanuel and know, without a doubt, once again that God is with us.