

This Will Be a Sign for You
Luke 2:1-20
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Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah,* the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,* praising God and saying,
14‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

When I was 9 years old, my mom and I were in a church production of “Amahl and the Night Visitors,” a story about the miraculous healing of a boy who would then go to see the baby Jesus. After each rehearsal, mom would reward me with a cold bottle of Fanta Orange or Fanta Grape from the church soda machine. You can imagine what deliberation went into my selection each night, given those yummy options. Then one blessed night, I put mom’s coins in the machine, pushed the Fanta Grape button, and out of the machine came a cold bottle of Fanta Grape AND a cold bottle of Fanta Orange!!! It was undoubtedly the greatest moment of my childhood up til then, maybe of anyone’s childhood as far as I knew.

“How did this happen?” I asked Mom through an involuntary smile. You’re just special, like everyone else... she said. Well, the proof was clearly in my hands. I took alternating sips from each bottle, all the way home, (GESTURE, SIPS AND SHOWERING IN SODA) and was up all night from sugar and exhilaration. I put the empty bottles on my trophy shelf, as a reminder of the wonderful thing that had happened to me. Nine year old boys, of course, just like everyone else, need stories of validation and meaning. That soda story became part of my young boy’s canon, a true story by which I knew that I was special too, and that something or someone was looking out for me.

Over time, though, my soda bottles, and the sweet story they used to contain, began to lose their assurance. Like when I got beat up by bullies, or when girls would make fun of me, or when I got in big trouble, or when Mom first got sick. Those bottles came to signify something else over time, a sweet memory that proved temporary. So one day, in a fit of grief, I took those old soda bottles into the back yard and threw them into the deep, dark forest, the kind that was overgrowing into my life and mind. Some hopeful signs, it would seem, can be overcome.

But tonight, on Christmas, we celebrate a sign, the baby Jesus in a manger, and a God who are present, living, breathing, and growing in places of darkness to shine light. This is not memorabilia recalling a good moment, this is revelation declaring an eternal goodness at work in the most unassuming places.

Perhaps you noticed, Luke gives us a rather spare account of the birth itself, “the time came [and] she gave birth” is the riveting account we get of the dawn of God’s human life on earth. But Luke gives lots of energy to the SIGNIFICANCE of the birth of Jesus. Jesus was descended from King David, born in Bethlehem as the prophet Micah said the messiah would be. This baby messiah was a sign that God’s ancient promises of blessing and redemption to the Jews, after hundreds of years of disappointment and oppression, were alive, new, and breathing.

This sign of God’s faithfulness was delivered in an unassuming place, to shepherds living in the fields, working by night. Shepherds get a pretty good name these days in church, but they were despised in the days of Jesus, outcasts, lowly, and poor wanderers. So for the sign of God’s presence and faithfulness to be revealed to these outsiders is part of the revelation itself – God has come not to the places of power, but to the places of poverty, to shine light in places of darkness. God in Jesus Christ, on this holy night, was born outside, outside the inn, outside the social structures, outside of power and control, in order to proclaim that in the eyes of God there is no more outside. The sign of your saving is a poor child lying in a manger, and this poor child is God made low for you, God coming to be with you to express God’s boundless love for you, everywhere in your life that you feel in the dark, or on the outside. The baby Jesus is a living, breathing sign that God knows lowliness, hunger, being outside, and it is in this place that God on earth is born, an out of this place from which God will rise for all.

This baby God on earth is good news for every part of us that feels left wandering outside. For those who are homeless and cold and hungry, GOOD NEWS, God is there and vulnerable with you. For those who are turned away from jobs or schools or opportunities, GOOD NEWS, God is there with you too, and the story doesn’t end with you left out of anything. For those struggling with grief and loneliness and doubts about where God is, GOOD NEWS, that’s where God is born to us, in the outside places, born to be with and for us, and born with the power to re-write the story we thought we were living in.

Such a sign must be seen to be believed, particularly for those used to being on the outside, and so the shepherds went to the stable to find this baby lying in a manger. What a long walk that must have been, between hearing about a sign and seeing it for yourself. Can this sign of the messiah as a baby in a manger possibly be true? Can God really be here with US, outside, cold, and vulnerable like we are?

The shepherds’ walk to Bethlehem, looking for a sign of good news, reminds me of the old story about a young son who left home, got mixed up with the wrong crowd and drugs, got arrested and went to prison. After serving his time, he wrote his mom and dad a letter, saying, “Mom, Dad, I know I’ve brought shame to the family. I’ll understand if you don’t want to see me again. A week from Saturday I’ll be on a train passing through town.” Because the train goes by the family home, the boy writes this: “If for some reason you do want to see me again, if you want me to come home, tie a yellow ribbon (so I can seek it at dusk) ‘round the old oak tree behind the house, and I’ll get off the train.” When the fateful Saturday came, the boy hopped on the train to pass by home, his heart pounding the whole way. He told a stranger next to him the story, about the sign he was waiting for, and what it would signify, home, forgiveness, love. As they came into town, the

boy said to the stranger, "We're almost there. I can't bear to look, would you look for me?" His heart was leaping out of his chest. As the train rounded the final bend, the stranger fell silent, and tears filled his eyes. The boy's heart sank, no sign? Then the boy sat up to see the empty tree he feared would be there all along, but instead his eyes beheld an old familiar oak tree... with yellow ribbons on every limb, waving to him in the wind, reaching out, summoning him home. It was a sign like this one, one that spoke of love and no more life outside, that the shepherds happened upon in a stable.

Also signified in the holy baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger, is that this presence of God, this newly born embodiment of divinity, is young, hungry, and growing. And just as this baby would grow and blossom and become known as Jesus the Christ, showing the world the godly life of giving and loving and hoping and rising, so too God's presence with us is a dawning, a growing, pointing toward a day when you and I and the whole world are different, whole, restored. It is not just the sign itself, the holy baby, but the new world to which the baby points, that we celebrate on this night.

This new world, this new story being written, can work on us, and through us, for Christmas gets us pointed to the blessed will of God for all. It is a holy day each year where we hear again where God is, here just outside, and discover again where we are, in the always unfolding story of God in the world, with the capacity to re-write it.

There once was a Christmas pageant in a small church, telling the very story about signs that we read tonight. In this production, the parts were played by teenagers. The guy who played the innkeeper was an awkward young man, one who was lost and wandering and fearful about almost everything. This young man was not comfortable with the spotlight of a church production, and when the innkeeper's moment came, he trembled. When Mary and Joseph appeared at his door, he spoke his one line very quickly, "There's no room for you in the inn." But as Mary and Joseph turned and walked wearily away, the fumbly innkeeper suddenly discovered himself part of a holy story, and heard his caustic words, and felt his capacity to become a new part of the unfolding story. "Wait a minute," he called out to Joseph and Mary. "Don't go. You can have my room."

This will be a sign for you, a holy, lowly baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger, but thanks be to God, and the divine possibility Christ revealed to live in you and me, maybe not for long.