

Fourth Sunday of Advent
The Reverend John H. Brock

5:30 p.m. Saturday, December 18, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

I have shared before that I struggled for a while as to whether or not I was being called to be an ordained person. I could think of lots of reasons NOT to go to seminary: I didn't want to learn Greek; I didn't want to learn Hebrew; the weird looking clothes just kind of threw me off. I didn't like the way pastors were sometimes treated by ordinary people. I never had so many people apologize to me for swearing. You know, before I was a pastor nobody ever apologized when they swore in front of me. You wear this weird looking collar, and they say, "Oh I'm so sorry, I said dang."

I could occasionally come up with a few positive reasons, but what I really wanted was a sign. Some kind of signal from God, "John, this is what you're supposed to be doing." You know, it worked for Noah, at least according to Bill Cosby. So would it really be that hard for God to send me a fax? What if I got an unsolicited scholarship to a seminary somewhere?

A few years ago there was a movie called "Signs" that came out. It was about an alien invasion of earth. Well, it was really more about the various signs that preceded that invasion, and how those signs were interpreted - or misunderstood - by the human population. And that's a problem with signs: they often aren't clear enough.

Now, we do have lots of signs in our life. We have the literal sign, street signs that tell us where to go, or exit signs when we come out of a movie theater. We've got more serious signals or signs that happen: a knowing glance between two adults, or a note passed underneath the desk at school. There are medical signs: a mole that has changed shape or color, or size. The sign of a tightening in the chest or persistent tingling in the leg that won't go away. We look for signs, don't we? We want signs. What am I suppose to do with my life. Is this the right person for me? Should I accept this new position at work? Yet, where are these signs when we want them, when we need them? That's the problem about signs, is when we do get them we don't always understand what they might indeed mean.

There's a joke about the young man who was in seminary and he was not a very good student. He was mediocre in class at best; he gave meandering and boring sermons, and *no*, his name was not John Brock. And so finally at the end of the second semester his advisor calls him in and he says, tell me why is it that you want to be a pastor? He said, well I was supposed to be plowing the corn one day, but it was such a beautiful day I was sitting down in the meadow and looking up at the sky and I saw these two clouds and clear as day it was "P" and a "C" and I knew that it meant "Preach Christ." His advisor looked at him and said, are you sure it didn't mean "Plow Corn?"

Signs are around us, but we don't always understand them.

For the nation of Judah, in the time of Isaiah before the fall of Jerusalem, the people, the prophet and even the king were all looking for a sign. Now we need to understand first of all of what's going on, and to do **that** we need to look at 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28, because those are the two chapters in scripture that tell us about King Ahaz. Ahaz was twenty years old when he came to the throne. His father, Jotham, was king before him. His father, as scripture puts it, "did what was right in the sight of the Lord." Jotham was all of 41 when he died and Ahaz takes the throne. Ahaz, unlike his father and his grandfather, does NOT do what is right in the sight of the Lord. Scripture tells us that Ahaz made his son "pass through fire." That's a euphemism. It means he offered his son as a human sacrifice to one of the pagan gods.

When the northern kingdom of Israel, along with the King of Aram, which is modern day Syria, make a move against Ahaz, Ahaz runs to the king of Assyria, which would be most of modern day Turkey and Iran and Iraq, basically surrounding all of those countries. Assyria, which was in that time and in that place the largest and most powerful nation around and that's where our reading today from Isaiah picks up.

Ahaz is looking for a way out. He's looking for a sign, for somewhere to go. Even though he's been leading the people of Judah away from the Lord God, even though he's been promoting the pagan god, even though he's striving to cover his own behind for the mess that's he's made of his kingdom, Isaiah and the Lord are trying to give him a way out. Isaiah goes so far as to say to 'Ahaz, listen up. You tire us as human beings with this faux faith of yours, with this simulated sanctity, and now you're trying this on God? Alright, you don't want to ask for a sign, alright don't ask for a sign.' Because Isaiah said 'ask anything that you want and God will GIVE that to you.' And Ahaz says, "Oh, well I wouldn't dare ask God for a sign, I'm not going to put a test before God." Isaiah sees right through that for what it is. 'A young woman,' Isaiah says, 'is pregnant, and she will give birth and her child shall be named God With Us. And by the time this boy is a toddler, he'll know the difference between good and evil, and more importantly, by the time this child is a toddler, these two nations that are threatening you, they will be wiped off the face of the earth.'

Ahaz doesn't want to see THAT sign. He doesn't want to see that side of God at work in the ordinary. Ahaz wants to see signs in power; he wants to see signs in military, in might, in armies and in silver and gold. Anybody can have a baby, anybody can name their kid whatever they want. Ahaz though, he's king. When he says "jump," he expects people to say "how high." He doesn't need any stinking *sign*. But what is this sign that God gives to him anyway, Immanuel, God With Us.

Now, we have signs around us especially at this time of year: signs of lights, the songs, trees, and wreaths, bows, and cards, and green and red and even silver bells. But where do those signs take us? What do those signs bring us to? And how are they any different to us as believers from those who celebrate the gifts and

the trees and the presents and even the little baby, but they don't celebrate Christ.

For Ahaz and even for Isaiah, it wasn't so much the young pregnant woman, or even the child to be born; what the sign was for them was that what the child was to be named and what that name implied. What it meant for the people who felt that they had been abandoned by God to be reminded so powerfully by the birth and *naming* of this child, God With Us. It was such a powerful sign that 700 years later the gospel writers recognized that sign from Isaiah and they applied it to the birth of our Lord. The gospel writers heard the hope, they saw the light in the midst of that war of words between Ahaz and Isaiah. They brought the hope, they brought the promise, they brought the sign to the people of their day and to us here.

The whole thing with Isaiah and Ahaz? Eventually Assyria does come to the aid of Ahaz and they stave off this invasion from these other countries and Jerusalem is not over taken, at least not by the countries of Aram and Israel. Assyria, for that matter, stops the invasion so completely, and in so doing so wipes out the nation of Israel, so that's the end of Israel. They're gone. We do not hear of that country anymore, and in a few more decades the southern kingdom of Judah will take on for themselves the name Israel.

Ahaz shows his appreciation by raiding the temple and grabbing as much gold and silver as he can and he brings it to the King of Assyria and he becomes a vassal, he becomes a subservient dog to the king of Assyria. Whether he meant to or not, Ahaz was the impetus for the destruction of Israel and the loss of that kingdom. Yet through all of that, God reaches across time and through history from the time of Ahaz and Isaiah to first century AD to bring it all the way forward to us, today, 21st century North Americans, a reminder, a sign, a sign of Immanuel, God With Us.

Amen.