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Advent 4A
Peace, Seattle
December 18, 2016
Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

SIGNS

An awful lot of us are looking at signs these days and trying to parse what those signs might mean.

I'm not talking Biblical prophecies right now—I'm talking cabinet appointments, Russian hacking schemes, the future of healthcare, the fate of the Earth—and scores of other talking points that mark the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration.

The signs are everywhere, and the signs all say the stakes are enormously high.

Every press release and tweet prompts new questions:
- Where's this train heading?
- How will it play out?
- What are the implications?
- What will it mean for us? For me?

So much seems up for grabs; so much seems unpredictable.

We're on the cusp of something big, and depending on your point of view, we're either about to march down the path toward greatness or go hurtling off the cliff.

It is to a context not unsimilar to our own, a context of anxiety and apprehension that Isaiah aims his voice this morning, to speak of a hope whose name is Immanuel—GOD-WITH-US.

Here's the situation on the ground…
- King Ahaz is in trouble. Neighboring kings want him to join an alliance against superpower Assyria.
- But, convinced they wouldn't stand a chance against the world's most powerful army, Ahaz rejects their offer, and their subsequent attack on him has Ahaz shaking in his boots.

Enter the prophet Isaiah. ASK GOD FOR A SIGN—he tells Ahaz—ANYTHING THAT'LL CONVINCE YOU TO TRUST IN HIM!

But Ahaz refuses. He doesn't want a sign—and it has nothing to do with putting God to the test. It's because, you see, he's already made of his mind.

THANKS, BUT NO THANKS, ISAIAH. I GOT THIS ONE.

But Isaiah gives him a sign any way.

> LOOK, THE YOUNG WOMAN IS WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON,
> AND SHALL NAME HIM IMMANUEL…

A woman? A child? To Ahaz this sign utterly misses the point. He needs a bigger army—not a child! Ahaz ignores the sign he's given and proceeds to enter into an alliance with Assyria, an alliance that will seal his doom.

As always, when we open the Scriptures, we enter a room in which a conversation has been going on a long time. Today, that conversation in Isaiah is about who you're going to trust.

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Isaiah asked Ahaz to put his trust in a GOD-WHO-IS-WITH-US rather than in a military alliance.
But Ahaz just couldn't see it.

Was the sign of the young woman conceiving a child too ordinary? Might a different sign have swayed him? Or was he so captive to his own point of view that there was no room left for God?

Seven centuries after Ahaz, a man named Joseph is asked to place his trust in the GOD-WHO-IS-WITH-US. How he responds to the invitation will make all the difference.

He's asked for Mary's hand in marriage. Her family has said YES; she has said YES.
But a crisis emerges when she turn up pregnant.

What is he to do? As a man of honor, he cannot go through with the wedding.
But as a man of compassion, he will not publicly shame her.

He resolves that he will quietly, unobtrusively call off the engagement.

But then, in the night, God gives Joseph a sign. And that sign—that dream—changes everything.

> 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.

How do we respond to unexpected news? How do we arrive at a place of trust in the disruptive, unexpected presence of the God who is with us?

Standing on the threshold as we are these days, we're all looking for signs—but are we looking in the right direction? Are we spending too much time gazing at Trump Tower for signs of what is to come?

Joseph had a dream. In a moment when he could have been overwhelmed by fear or anger or self-pity, Joseph took in the message: BE NOT AFRAID, and it changed him.

The dream that came to Joseph—like the dreams of his ancient namesake, came from God's creative mind—and it changed the trajectory of his life. And not only his life but the life of Mary and the child she would bear.

Seven centuries after Ahaz turned away from God's sign, Joseph is asked to put his trust in the God-With-Us, and he does. And this is the point upon which Matthew's story turns.

This is the point where we begin to understand, along with Joseph, that what's playing out here in Nazareth and Bethlehem isn't simply Joseph's story or Mary's story but God's story. And that Joseph and Mary are God's chosen instruments to help bring that plan—literally—to birth.

**When Joseph wakes from his dream, he does as the messenger of the Lord has said.
He takes Mary as his wife. Becomes her protector, provider, the legitimizer for Mary and her son. He gives the child his name.**

The signs God gives us can be hard to discern. They are persistent but subtle; they are strong and yet wrapped in vulnerability.

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They may come to us, like Joseph, in the still of the night; or in the voice of a companion sitting next to us or across from us. They may come to us during a walk in Lincoln Park. They may come to us as we gather around this Table.

These signs may be difficult to decipher. It may take awhile, perhaps even a lifetime, for us to catch on. But because God doesn't give up easily, the sign of Immanuel will always be companioned by hope.

In daring to trust his dream, in allowing himself to be convinced of its power, Joseph himself becomes a sign of God-with-us. And he helps prepare the way for the greatest gift of all—the babe who comes to save.

AMEN.