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Christmas Eve B
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2014
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Child of manger and star, as we enter your story once again this night, take us to that place where we can kneel with shepherds, where we can sing with angels, where we can find our hearts touched with the wonder of your birth and the depths of your love. Amen.

# NEW SIGN FOR A WORN WORLD

Sisters and brothers, grace and peace to you from Emmanuel, Christ the Lord. Amen

**In her book, Bright Evening Star, Madeleine L'Engle asks:**[1]

Was there a moment, known only to God, when all the stars held their breath, when the galaxies paused in their dance for a fraction of a second, and the Word, who had called it all into being, went with all his love into the womb of a young girl...

Power. Greater power than we can imagine, abandoned, as the Word knew the powerlessness of the unborn child...unseeing, unhearing, unknowing. Slowly growing... slowly swimming into life until the ocean in the womb is no longer large enough, and it is time for birth.

**Tonight we mark that birth: God's great leap from heavenly habitat to earthly home; from the scale of the infinite to a scale of size we can comprehend.**

**Tonight is a night of surprises**. First and foremost the stunning surprise that in this world which worships prestige, success, and raw power, the Creator of the Universe comes to us as a baby:

V**ulnerable, defenseless, and needy.**

**THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU,** God's Messenger proclaims:
**YOU WILL FIND A CHILD WRAPPED IN BANDS OF CLOTH AND LYING IN A MANGER.**

**Mary and Joseph's people had waited for centuries for freedom to come knocking.**
For generation after generation they'd focused their hope on the appearance of God's designated liberator, the Messiah. It was he who would lay the wood to the Roman army. It was he who would restore the nation's military strength and instill fear in Israel's neighbors once more.

**With hopes and expectations such as this, you'd think it would not be out of line to expect a divine sign greater than this—a child swaddled up in a feedbox! Where's the pomp? Where's the spectacle? Where's the hero?**

**On the final day of our visit to London last spring**, our family was enjoying a walk through Hyde Park when suddenly the sound of horses' hooves caught our ears; and turning our heads we watched as seventeen riders in the Queen's cavalry, decked out in regal uniforms of red, black and gold, rode by on their way to Buckingham Palace. **We took one look at each other and rushed to follow**.

We had decided, you see, that with limited time in London there were a limited number of experiences we could have. There simply wasn't time to see and do everything, and the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace was one thing we'd decided, reluctantly, to forego.

[1] From *Bright Evening Star: Mystery of the Incarnation*. Harold Shaw Pub, 1997.

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**But when we saw those horses with their red-coated riders we couldn't resist**—and we quickly found ourselves running to catch up, and so we followed them to the Palace, where we joined a thousand others from around the globe who'd come to witness the choreography, to hear the band and watch the spectacle of the Changing of the Guard unfold.

**The Kings and Queens, Presidents and rulers of this world announce themselves with parades and pomp and motorcades.**

**But in the fullness of time the confirmation that Messiah has come is a newborn baby's cry.**

**This is how God chooses to reveal himself:** A naked infant wrapped in birthing blankets, tucked away in a stable, in a one-horse town called Bethlehem.

**He comes so subtly that we might not even notice**. Only a handful of dubious old sheepherders become witnesses—which is hardly the place to start! And they are given a deceptively simple sign:

**YOU WILL FIND A CHILD WRAPPED IN BANDS OF CLOTH AND LYING IN A MANGER.**

**This, of course, is God's point.**

- God could have arrived with legions of troops, hooves thundering and horns blaring…
- God could have come armed for battle like an alien convoy in a science fiction thriller…

**But God chose a different way.**

> "The Creator of the Universe comes to us in smallness, weakness, and hiddenness," writes Henry Nouwen. "Somehow, I keep expecting loud and impressive events to convince me and others of God's saving power; but over and over again, I am reminded that spectacles, power plays, and big events are the ways of the world…Our salvation comes from something small, tender, and vulnerable, something hardly noticeable..."

**We may long for bigger signs.** We may long for more discernible divine activity, for a revelation at least grand enough to match the intensity of the catastrophes—both natural and human-made—that brutalize our world…

**But tonight we learn** that God's ways of transforming the world are not overt and coercive but subtle, humble, and surprising in their vulnerability.

> "Go to the crib," declares Mother Theresa, "and see how small he became,
> how he lived that total surrender to the full."

**THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU:**
**YOU WILL FIND A CHILD WRAPPED IN BANDS OF CLOTH AND LYING IN A MANGER.**

**And you, dear brother, dear sister, why have you come this night?**
Do you need, simply, to hear the story again? Or perhaps to hear again how God cared enough about this world—cares enough about you—to enter into the mess and muddle of the human story along with the rest of us?

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**Or does your purpose for being here tonight come from a different direction**?
**Is it about singing carols** you've known from childhood, or honoring a family tradition, or the search for something you can't quite name and only vaguely feel?

**Whatever mixture of motivations may have brought you here, consider this one too:**
That you and I have been drawn out of our homes on Christmas Eve because we know, or at least sense, that the sign given to the shepherds is meant for us as well; and that our yearning for peace and wholeness for ourselves, our families, and world, must begin here, at this manger. For *this* is where and how God has come to redeem the world.

**And so the drama that plays out in Bethlehem becomes our drama;**
**and we, too, become part of the story.**
"If we want to be part of these events," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "we cannot just sit there like a theater audience and enjoy all the lovely pictures. Instead, we ourselves will be caught up in this action, this reversal of all things; we must become actors on this stage. For this is a play in which each spectator has a part...and we cannot hold back."

**What part in this drama is God calling you to enact?**
**What signs of God's presence are unfolding in your life this season?**

**When we look at our world, it's easy to be overwhelmed by signs of breakdown:**
- Ebola
- Marysville
- Ferguson
- Pakistan

Each name has become, in recent months, another entry into the lexicon of unfathomable pain, sorrow, and loss. Each name reminds us how truly vulnerable we and those we love are in this world.

**When the prophet Isaiah speaks of the boots of warriors and of garments rolled in blood,**
it's all too easy for us to locate the graphics for what he's talking about; graphic pictures of senseless violence unfolding in places of conflict across the world and close to home.

**But tonight something new is taking place. Not a repeat of the old patterns, but instead something radically fresh, and totally unexpected.**

PUT AWAY YOUR WEAPONS, the prophet shouts, FOR A CHILD HAS BEEN BORN FOR US,
A SON GIVEN TO US; AUTHORITY RESTS UPON HIS SHOULDERS; AND HE IS NAMED:
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

**In the world's way of reckoning, authority is always, ultimately, exercised by FEAR.**

**But God invites us tonight to set our eyes and hearts and minds in a different direction.**

**DO NOT FEAR,** shouts the Messenger, **I BRING GOOD NEWS FOR ALL PEOPLE…**
**THIS DAY A SAVIOR IS BORN…AND THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU:**
**YOU WILL FIND A CHILD WRAPPED IN BANDS OF CLOTH AND LYING IN A MANGER.**

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**And strange as it may seem, as we follow beside the shepherds we discover precisely the God-with-us that we need**.

- Not a distant God,
- Not an absentee landlord,
- Not a God to be feared and avoided,
- Not a God of revenge or destruction,
- But a God who participates in the fullness of the human struggle and Earth's fate, right from the start, beginning right here in Bethlehem.

**This one who begins life wrapped in bands of cloth will later teach his apprentices how to use that cloth as a servant's towel.**

**And after his brutal death on the cross his body will once again be wrapped—this time in the bands of a burial shroud…**

**Until finally, on the third day, the stars hold their breath once more, the galaxies cease their turning, and these same bands of cloth lay scattered and abandoned in a now empty tomb.**

**These bands of cloth in which we find the child this night are more than swaddling clothes. They point us to the whole life of Christ.**

**THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU:**
**YOU WILL FIND A CHILD WRAPPED IN BANDS OF CLOTH AND LYING IN A MANGER.**

**May this sign of God-with-us lead you to find your place around the manger and at this Table, and to place your trust wholly in him. Amen.**

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Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.