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Christmas Eve C
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2009 epk
Luke 2:1-20, Isaiah 9:2-7

Manger child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, you are God's sign to us. Let us enter your story once more and find ourselves kneeling with the shepherds and singing with the angels. Touch us—heart and mind—with the wonder of your birth and the depths of your love. Amen.

A SIGN FOR YOU

From Afghanistan[1] to Mexico[2], we're looking for signs.
From Copenhagen[3] to DC[4], we're looking for signs.
From Mainstreet to Wallstreet, we're looking for signs.

Signs that wars will end and troops will come home.
Signs that global ideals can trump national interests; and that accessible healthcare for all is more than a pipedream.

Signs that the dream plane[5] will really fly, the economy will rebound, the mortgage will remain above water, and jobs will be taken off the endangered species list… **We're looking for signs tonight.**

Near Eatonville[6], in a Parkland[7] coffee shop, and on Beacon Hill[8]—we're looking for signs other than grave markers, that will help us cope with senseless deaths, and the grief of loved ones left behind…

Yes, we're looking for signs tonight—eagerly, hungrily, longingly—signs to assure that God is with us, when that assurance is oh so elusive.

The prophet Isaiah gave a sign. He uttered it at a time when his people's future was on the verge of extinction; on the threshold of being clear-cut by superpowers that threatened on every side.

> LOOK! He said. A SHOOT WILL RISE FROM THE STUMP OF JESSE.[9]
> A SHAFT OF LIGHT WILL PIERCE THE DARKNESS.[10]
> LOOK! THE BOOTS OF WARRIORS, THEIR GUNS AND SWORDS, THE BLOOD-SOAKED GARMENTS FROM MOUNTAIN AND PLAIN—ALL OF IT WILL BECOME FUEL FOR THE FIRE!
> AND A CHILD, A CHILD BORN FOR US, WILL USHER IN GOD'S REIGN OF PEACE.[11]

Isaiah gave a sign that boldly proclaimed: there will be a future for God's people;
a sign rooted in historical reality, but pointing toward a greater fulfillment yet to come.

And seven centuries later, the greater fulfillment did come; when the sign that was knit together in Mary's womb struggled forth into the world and took—AAAAHHHHH—his first breath as a newborn baby boy.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/26/world/asia/26afghan.html?_r=1
[2] http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2010567938_apltdrugwarmexico.html
[3] http://www.seattlepi.com/national/1103ap_climate.html
[4] http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/businesstechnology/2010573082_apushealthcareoverhaul.html
[5] http://blog.seattlepi.com/aerospace/archives/188342.asp
[6] http://www.seattlepi.com/local/413559_vigil23.html
[7] http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2010491065_webcoffeeshop12m.html
[8] http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2010591658_twodead25m.html
[9] Isaiah 11:1
[10] Isaiah 9:2
[11] Isaiah 9:6, 7

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Tonight we mark that birth as the **ultimate sign** that God is with us, Emmanuel, **but we want more! More… and different, too,** because it's not the kind of sign we expect. And it's not given, in Luke's accounting of the story, to people we think could make a difference…

Not to Emperors, governors, mayors, pastors or priests, but to sheep herders out in the middle of nowhere!

Yet, suddenly, on this night, NO-WHERE becomes, in God's way of imagining, NOW-HERE.

Yes, we are once again and forever surprised by the audacity of God to think that we could be satisfied by such a sign as this: a baby…wrapped up…in a feed trough.

But there it is…

> THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU: YOU WILL FIND A CHILD WRAPPED IN BANDS OF CLOTH AND LYING IN A MANGER. [Luke 2:12]

Mary and Joseph's people had waited centuries for freedom to come knocking.
Generation after generation had focused their hope on the appearance of God's special envoy, God's designated liberator, God's anointed one, the Messiah.

You would think they would not be out of line to expect a greater sign than this!

But in the fullness of time 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.

His coming is so subtle, we might not even notice.

> "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, & vulnerable, something hardly noticeable..."[12]

This sign is hardly even big enough for us to stumble over, yet stumble we do.

THE FINITE, we argue, IS NOT CAPABLE OF BEARING THE INFINITE!
One 1st century Jew living in a backwater province of the Roman Empire could not possibly be the full and complete revelation of God! **But in Bethlehem lies God's counterargument. This manger-child shouts back that God is capable—indeed, has decided irrevocably—to dwell among his people.[13]**

The "scandal of particularity." God not revealed in "timeless truths and principles" but, instead, God locating himself in human history as Jesus.

We may long for bigger signs. We may yearn 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 devastate our world. But that's not what we get tonight.

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[12] Henri J.M. Nouwen. *¡Gracias! - A Latin American Journal* (New York: HarperCollins), entry for December 2, 1981.
[13] Robert Redman, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 1.* (Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 119.

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Tonight we learn that God's ways of transforming the world are not overt and coercive but subtle, humble, and surprisingly vulnerable.

"Go to the crib," declares Mother Theresa, "and see how small [God] 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 the grace of God sneaks into our world under the radar of our expectations, in the person of Jesus.[14]

When we look at the world, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the signs of breakdown.

But God's invitation tonight is to set our eyes and hearts and minds in a different direction. To follow with the shepherds in search of Emmanuel.

And strange as it seems, by joining them there we discover precisely the God-with-us that we need.

- Not a distant God,
- not a God to be feared and avoided,
- not a God of revenge or destruction,
- but a God who shows us his face and commitment to participate completely in the human struggle, right from the start, right here in Bethlehem.

The world is more comfortable with explanation than with mystery.
But you can't explain the incarnation. All you can do is go to the manger and see for yourself.

The shepherds got that, and that's what they set out to do.

And have we not been drawn from our homes this night because we know—or at least sense—that the sign given to the shepherds is meant for us as well? That our yearning for peace and wholeness for ourselves, our families, our nation and world, must begin here, at this manger?

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

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

[14] Robert Redman, ibid, p. 120.