



“Signs from Within”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

January 7, 2009

Our reading this first Wednesday of the new year comes to us from Mark 1:1-11. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Did you guys happen to catch the news of the alleged angel sighting at Presbyterian Hospital just prior to Christmas Day? It was quite interesting. If you missed it, just before Christmas there was apparently quite a stir on one of the floors of the hospital when a bright light- kind of in the shape of an angel was spotted on the monitor of a nurse’s station security camera hovering just outside the hospital room of a very sick young girl who had recently had life sustaining measures withdrawn from her. One nurse reported also seeing a man standing just outside the unit doors who kept vanishing when she would open them to let him in. Just days later, inexplicably, the young girl, who had not been expected to survive, went home fully recovered. I learned just after hearing the story myself that they had called in a local preacher to look at the tape and authenticate whether or not it was actually an angel they caught on film- which made me smile a bit one because I do wonder sometimes what people think they teach us at seminary, two because they never seem to ask a Presbyterian to do these things (what are we, chopped liver?), and finally because if it is true, I can’t imagine an act of God needing any authentication from us. It is like the formerly blind man in the temple who said to the inquisitive priests about Jesus, “All I know is that once I was blind, but now I see.”

We are in many ways now moving out of that familiar and in its own way miraculous season of Christmas that is filled with that wonderful atmosphere of awe and inspiration and anticipation and joy.

Just two weeks away and already the new year has come rolling in with a rather unremarkable thud. Welcome back to ‘Normal time’ a friend wrote in an email recently- as opposed to ‘holiday time’ he joked. Just two days ago while I was at the Y someone announced more boldly, “It’s the first Monday of the year!” and for a minute there I wasn’t entirely sure that he was going to make it out alive.

No, it seems that the world will have its way and won’t ever let us bask in the quiet glow of Christmas for long. There are no more angel sightings to make headlines- quite the contrary actually as political corruption and violence in the Middle East erupt back onto the scene and we find ourselves once again having to squint to see where and how God is at work. Things just aren’t always as clear this side of Christmas.

There are no stars to point the way to any manger- no choirs of angels to announce our arrival once we get there and yet the imperative of our faith to seek God remains. And the desire to

have our hearts jump at the prospect of a sign - an angel sighting in pediatrics, a virgin who conceives and bears a son- remains as well.

Don't we so often find ourselves in the midst of all this familiar - and sometimes very painful-normal time wanting to join in the cry of Isaiah who said to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!" God, be undeniable and spectacular! Show us a sign!

Of course the people back then- in Jesus' time- were looking for signs too. Astrologers watched the skies for signs of events of cosmic significance, of course, but there were also those who looked for signs of the coming Messiah. Signs foretold, for instance, by Isaiah who also said, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Sure there were signs. But then came Jesus- God's son, God himself- born into the world just like the rest of us only quite possibly with less public fanfare. Then came John- a man who reeked of camel and had a taste for locusts- who preached repentance - told the people to turn away from what they had been doing- to make up their minds, as the word translates, to turn their hearts from their ways to God's ways. He may as well have been wearing a sandwich board saying 'repent- the end is near - one who is more powerful than I is coming.'

These are not spectacular signs. They are ordinary signs seen by an unremarkable few. And here we have the story of the baptism of Jesus.

The baptism itself is described in zero detail, but then we get our sign- and read that "just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

There is usually so much orchestral music playing in my mind when I think about this scene or the scene at the nativity- so many sweeping string sections and glory hallelujahs that strike up when I try and picture these events that the gospel writers describe that they obscure my vision- and I forget that precious few actually saw them.

In Mark's gospel, the reader is omniscient- we know it all- but we are given no detail to flesh out the narrative. In Mark's gospel John does not give any indication that he recognizes Jesus- there is no mention of anyone among the crowds taking notice, actually. It says only that Jesus was baptized and as he came out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart, the spirit descend, and heard the voice. But that's it.

It was an extremely localized phenomenon. And then, as far as anyone else is concerned - and it would appear from Mark's writing that no one, actually was concerned, Jesus disappears into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. A young adult- a man my age actually- takes off on his own for about a month and a half, then comes back and begins to heal and to teach.

It is as Donald Juel, one of my former seminary professors, said of the temple curtain being torn in half when Jesus was crucified, "the barrier between God and his creation had been torn in half but people still lived as if nothing had happened." They just didn't see the signs.

While Jesus enacted miracles of healing in his lifetime and news of these events spread, the miracles and signs associated with our Lord were relatively localized phenomenon. They occurred at a specific time and place in history, and were witnessed by a specific few. And yet throngs of followers would begin to seek out Jesus.

Perhaps in the hope of a spectacle- a star in the sky or the appearance of an angel maybe. But more likely the reason for their interest had much less to do with what happened around Jesus than it did with what they noticed taking place within themselves when he was around. Because there was something different about this thirty-something, wasn't there?

In the same way also after his resurrection, the proof of which was authenticated by a very few, miracles of healing would take place at the hands of the disciples, but more broadly it was the stirring of hearts- signs from within that would compel the people to turn from their ways to God's and to make up their minds to follow Jesus.

Because the gospel did not spread beyond that little region in the Middle East where a dozen or so followers of one man performed a few signs and wonders in his name, did not topple prevailing religious sentiments in Rome in its heyday, did not cause martyrs and missionaries to risk their lives over centuries, did not spread to billions of people over time around the entire globe because a few lucky people saw the signs that the world had been seeking for a thousand years, but because for two thousand years people have repented and hearts have been changed - lives transformed- because of the movement of the Holy Spirit within them that made Christ real.

During Christmas we grow accustomed to searching for signs outside of ourselves to speak to and give meaning to our deepest questions and need - it is as our first hymn said- "and ye, beneath life's crushing load - with painful steps and slow-look now for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing."

We search for signs of God's presence and activity- we hunger for the wonder, for the undeniable and spectacular just as people have since the beginning of time, but we have all the signs we need right inside ourselves where the Holy Spirit is at work. That Spirit. Who was poured out by God our heavenly Father, to descended upon our Lord his son like a dove at his baptism. Who gave him power to heal- to endure death- and be resurrected. That Spirit who was sent by Jesus after his resurrection into his disciples to be his spiritual presence with them always. That Spirit that would be multiplied in the hearts of those who heard their proclamation of the gospel so that that resulting legion of believers- stirred not by what they saw around them but by the Holy Spirit within would then together be what we call church- Christ's physical presence in the world forever.

We have a few simple signs before us today. Nothing fancy but that we experience as sacrament. Because in addition to Christ's sacrifice and God's love, they remind us that while we may look for signs of God's presence outside of ourselves in bread or angels or stars in the sky, we must also remember that we are called to celebrate not the sign but the thing it signifies- a truth that is deep within each of us where signs are to be found too - which is that by the Holy Spirit Christ is present there. He is our spirit and we are his body and together we move out into the world to be living sacraments- living signs of God's presence with us - still and always proclaiming Emmanuel. Amen.