

“What Kind of Sign Is This?”

Luke 2:1-12

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Christmas Eve, 2008

I haven't had time to drive around town lately, but I do try to keep up with the church advertisements, especially at this time of year. Two newspaper ads caught my eye recently. Maybe you noticed them, too. Two ads, almost the same size, but with two very different messages. One said this: “Christmas Drive Through. Free! Live Animals! Live Performers!” The other ad had only one line, “Christmas, when GOD came to earth”.

Here we are on Christmas Eve, almost literally glancing back and forth between these two very different signs. One, *the sign of our times* in which the mystery of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ is relegated to a performance. To a quick “drive through” where nothing is asked of us, not even the inconvenience of getting out of our cars! Then there's the *more ambiguous sign*. A sign that raises more questions than it answers. A sign that points to a mystery beyond words. Christmas, when GOD came to earth.

It is a special privilege for me to preach this evening because there are many here whom we do not see all that often. Friends and family from far away and guests right off the street. I have been thinking especially of you as I reflected on the message for this evening. We are very glad you are here. We welcome you and pray you might find a sign of *God with us* here.

Tonight we are all here, believers, unbelievers, and the many of us who wander the strange road from belief to unbelief and back again. We are here to recall the familiar yet strange tale told of the incarnation of the divine with the human in a baby boy.

The gospel of St. Luke tells the human side of God's birth first. There is the historical context. And even though the details don't all fit with recorded history, Luke has the general idea right¹. Luke lays out the connection between Joseph and King David. Luke gives us the practical reason why Joseph had to bring his very pregnant fiancée all the way to Bethlehem. And there is, of course, the human birth. Natural childbirth: no anesthetic, no doctor. Pain and sweat and struggle. No miracle, no mystery, no real evidence of God anywhere yet in the story until. . .

¹ Inferred from discussion in Interpretation commentary on Luke, p. 34. In fact, Luke's chronology and the census referred to do not fit the history to which we have other access. However, beyond any argument as to Luke's historical sources is his basic conviction that emperors, governments, and laws serve the purpose of God, often without knowing it.

Until we get to the phrase in which everything changes. Until we get to the hinge upon which all human history hangs. “And in the same region there were some shepherds. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them.”

It is here God breaks into human history. If you were there you might almost have heard a cracking sound where heaven and earth collide. It is a huge sound, but it is only a mother’s wail followed by a newborn’s cry. And it is terribly frightening, because it is so strange and unbelievable. The lone angel tells of Jesus’ birth. The angel calls him “Christ the Lord”. Nowhere else in the entire New Testament is Jesus called this². Then the angel tells the shepherds how they will know the Savior. “This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger.”

A baby? In a manger? What kind of sign is this?

Throughout the centuries great artists have attempted to capture the moment of Jesus’ birth in such a way as to point to the great mystery of the Incarnation. Some have been more successful than others in drawing together the contradictory images of divinity and humanity. Even so, divine images often predominate---the haloes, the golden light, the beatific smiles.

We find an exception in a 14th century fresco by Giotto.³ Giotto’s Nativity shows Mary lying down after giving birth. She is lying on the ground, facing and embracing the baby Jesus. Joseph sits, tired and pensive, looking away in the foreground. Above Mary and Jesus is a rough roofline of a stable, and above that, five angels in various poses, two looking heavenward and three looking down. It is one of the few depictions of the Nativity that actually show Mary reclining after giving birth⁴. Most classical paintings show Mary praying on her knees, which if you’ve had any experience at all with childbirth, you know it simply didn’t happen that way.

And in a 15th century painting by Ghirlandaio we see the naked baby Jesus, bigger and rounder than a newborn to be sure, but naked on the ground with his thumb in his mouth⁵. This is reproduced on your bulletin cover this evening.

A naked baby boy lying on the ground, sucking his thumb. What kind of sign is this? What kind of Messiah is this?

This sign of the Messiah is undoubtedly a radical sign. Not a comfortable sign. Not what the long history of waiting had ordered. This is a squalling, messy, and confusing sign. We somehow want to change this sign, make it cleaner, larger,

² New Interpreters’ Bible commentary, Luke 2:1-20.

³ This fresco is painted into a wall of a chapel in Padua, Italy

⁴ http://italophiles.com/st_matt.htm

⁵ Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource, Volume 1, p. 94. The painting referred to is by Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Adoration of the Shepherds*.

more kingly. Give it haloes and golden light. Give us a neat and sparkling Nativity scene, like the ones we see on Christmas cards.

We are unnerved by this unexpected sign. We want to keep our distance, stay inside our cars and move on to the next thing. We don't want to get down in the straw and the dung and the dirt. This is not the kind of God we usually think of when we think of God. When we think of God, we rarely think of helplessness, of flesh and blood.

But in this scandal of God becoming a baby, we come into contact with who God is. A baby is vulnerable. Jesus was vulnerable. God entered into our vulnerability because God loves us! God put Godself at our mercy, at the mercy of frailty and hunger and rejection. At the mercy of those who would, ultimately kill God because God in Jesus was too different, too scandalous.

God coming to us in baby Jesus is a sign that shouts beyond words that *there is no place God will not go* to be with us. God enters into humanity. Unimaginable! This is not a figment of human imagination. People would have come up with a better, more plausible story than this, this scandal⁶.

What kind of sign is this? This is a sign that demands much. This sign cries out for our response. Just as God did not "drive by" our humanity, but was a part of it in every way except for sin, we are called out of our comfort to do the *work of Christmas*. The great preacher Howard Thurman wrote of this:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost,
 To heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry,
 To release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring peace among brothers⁷.

⁶ Many ancient myths, such as those of Balder, Adonis, and Bacchus, contained stories similar to the one in the Bible---of a god coming to earth, dying to save his people, and rising again from the dead. C. S. Lewis had always considered the New Testament story simply another one of these myths. But the Gospels, Lewis noted, did not contain the rich, imaginative writings of these talented ancient writers. They appeared to be *simple eyewitness accounts of historical events*, primarily by Jews who were clearly unfamiliar with the great myths of the pagan world around them. From The Question of God, A. M. Nicholi, Jr., p. 86.

⁷ From The Moon Of Christmas And Other Celebrations, by Howard Thurman.

If you haven't been here for Advent, if you're not prepared to meet him, come anyway. If you're here under duress, if you're here to please somebody else---if you think it's all make believe, come anyway. If you're one who comes every week, draw closer. Get out of your cars. Come meet him. Come see for yourselves. Get some dirt under your fingernails and some straw on your coat. Come, open yourself up to the tiny possibility that here in the manger lies hope.