

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
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God With Us!

Growing up in cattle country and surrounded by farm boys of my own, I've listened to hours of country music! My father listened to albums of the "Sons of the Pioneers." I especially remember a ballad entitled, "Cool Water" playing on the blond console stereo in the corner of the living room. At the Chase County fair, celebrities like The Oak Ridge Boys and Loretta Lynn performed before sell-out crowds. When our sons were high school boys they bought CD's with artists of a later generation, playing songs like Kenny Chesney's, "She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy!" (I believe this was a hit in every FFA Chapter!) Another popular country song of the late '90's was a song by Bill Engvall entitled, "Here's Your Sign." Anyone remember this tune? Let me share a few of the lyrics which "hint" at the fact that we sometimes ask "silly" questions...

I just hate stupid people.
They should have to wear signs...
That way you wouldn't rely on them, would you?
You wouldn't ask them anything. It would be like, "Excuse me...oops,
never mind"
"I didn't see your sign."

It's like before my wife and I moved from Texas to California our house was full of boxes and there was a u-Haul truck in our driveway. My friend comes over and says, "Hey, You moving?"

"Nope."

"We just pack our stuff up once or twice a week. Just to see how many boxes it takes."
"Here's your sign."

Last time I was home I was driving around I had a flat tire, I pulled my truck into one of these side-of-the-road gas stations, the attendant walks out, looks at my truck, looks at me, I swear... he went, "Tire go flat?"

I couldn't resist.

I said "Nope".

"No I was driving around and those other three just swelled right up on me."

"Here's your sign."

This morning's texts are all about signs! The Isaiah text invites us into a scene as the Lord speaks to King Ahaz saying, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." The Gospel of Matthew records that Joseph was dealing with the news of Mary's unexpected pregnancy and just when he had come to a decision about what to do with Mary... after perhaps months of struggle and inner turmoil..."just when he had resolved to do this (dismiss her quietly) an angel of the Lord appeared to him..." Joseph receives a sign in a dream- a sign – a sign which didn't take away the struggle - but which points him in a very different direction from his earlier resolve.

I have questions about these kinds of signs:

1. Does God still offer them?
2. Do we dare to ask for them?
3. How often do we miss them?
4. And like in Joseph's case...do they come even when we've already made up our minds?

Let me muse a bit with you about signs.

The Lord offered King Ahaz a sign, The Lord said to Ahaz, "just ask for a sign...the sky's the limit...just ask and I will give you a sign about a way forward from this sticky place you find yourself in. (Remember, King Ahaz was "between a rock and a hard place." The kings of Israel and Aram wanted to replace Ahaz with a puppet ruler of their choosing, one who would join their coalition against Assyria. Jerusalem is at risk! Yet, strangely in this time of great threat, King Ahaz piously refuses, "Oh no, Lord, I wouldn't put you to the test!" Why not? If God offers a sign, why would anyone refuse?!

Well, King Ahaz and I probably don't have too many things in common, but we might share something in this situation! I don't believe that Ahaz *really* meant that he didn't want to test God...maybe he just didn't want his world turned upside down! I believe that Ahaz gave this wonderfully, humble sounding response because he was *really* afraid of God's answer. I can relate to this...God's signs...God's leadings and promptings. If I invite them...welcome them...then what am I to do when they come? When I have my mind made up the last thing I want is more information...like a sign from God! I might end up in places I've never gone before!

I'm reminded of the behavior of the cattle when it is time to move them from one pen to another. When the calves are brought into the barn, they need to be "corralled" by gates and fences. This keeps them "penned up" so that they aren't running around the farm, across the fields and into the woods. (Joel knows about moving cattle at Rediger Farms!) Yet, after a couple months time, when they have out-grown their present space, it is time to move them to new surroundings. The gates are taken down, the fences removed...and guess what... the cattle walk tentatively to the edge of the pen and don't venture any farther. Sometimes, a person has to get right in between them and force the first ones to

take the initial steps into uncharted territory! Often that's the direction God's signs point us...into new "territory" - geographical, intellectual and spiritual territory!

God's signs...do we dare to ask for them? And if do dare to, why would we avoid asking?

Maybe these are some more reasons for our hesitancy:

- We don't know what signs of God look like? What should we be expecting?
- And, if we do "sense" a sign then come more big questions, "Is this really a sign or is it simply "wishful thinking?" Maybe we are mis-taken. What if we interpret a conversation, an opportunity and an experience as a sign from God and then later it appears that we mis-understood...that we didn't get it right!

I'm reminded of our NT text of last week. John the Baptist, the great prophet proclaiming the coming Messiah, the one who had baptized Jesus in the Jordan, now imprisoned in Herod's jail, sends word asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?" John believed he had received a sign, but now he wasn't sure that he had interpreted it accurately. And...it had been very costly if he hadn't been mistaken!

This morning's text tells us that Joseph is engaged to Mary. Suddenly, everything seems ruined. His plans for the future are shattered by the news that Mary is pregnant. Mary says an angel appeared to her – a sign from God. Can't you just hear a bewildered, perhaps angry Joseph saying... "O come on now, Mary... getting pregnant before marriage?... that can't be a sign from God!"

Joseph is a well-regarded Jewish man. He is trying to be faithful to the Laws of Moses. He is known as a righteous man, and now this! There are hard questions to be asked. Decisions must be made. Yet, "... just when he had resolved to dismiss her quietly, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...'"

So, now we discover that Joseph had been afraid – what might he have been afraid of? Perhaps he had been afraid for his reputation. What would others think? (What must they be thinking already!) Perhaps, he had been afraid to disobey the Law. There were specific regulations about what to do with an adulterous woman. With this, Joseph resolved, with this...Joseph decided...and yet it was precisely then that God gave him a sign. Amazingly, Joseph not only recognized the sign, but trusted it - and to everyone's dismay - took Mary as his wife. What kind of rumors did this unleash about his involvement? Maybe Joseph wasn't so honorable after all!

Joseph wasn't the only one who was afraid. Everyone else in this story who received a sign was afraid too. The angel's most famous line after saying "hello" seems to be, "don't be afraid." Zechariah was speechless. Mary fled from Nazareth. How Mary must have longed for someone with whom to share the great sign given to her. Cousin Elizabeth would understand as she, too, was experiencing God's stirrings within her. At their meeting both women burst into song.

How exciting to see the Spirit at work in each one's life – in ways seemingly suited just for each! Yet, out of everyone's' mouths came the same deep astonishment at the signs given by God. "How can these things be!" Zechariah exclaimed. Mary, too, said "How can this be?" And then there was Joseph who wasn't even looking for further counsel. He had already resolved to do what the Law required when God's sign changed everything!

Old women and virgins in expectancy...angels making surprise appearances out of nowhere both to priests and little girls; angels derailing the righteous decision of a devout man! How can these things be!

Yet, it isn't only that which is novel or unimaginable which helps us sift through our fickle whims and wants to discover the true, enduring signs of God among us. Return with me to Jesus' message to the imprisoned John.

Jesus replied to John saying, "You can recognize the kingdom of God like this. When you see the blind receiving sight, the lame walking and the lepers cleansed, when you see the deaf hear and the dead being raised, when the poor have good news brought to them, then you will know that the kingdom of God is among you." Then you will most clearly see the sign of "Immanuel, God-With-Us."

In our community there must be people longing for a sign much like Ahaz and Joseph...all persons whose futures seemed wrecked, maybe even doomed...

This week...

- A family's home burned to the ground as they attempted to heat their home with small electric heaters. For whatever reason, they had been living without gas or water service to their Jefferson Street home.
- An immigrant family had a drastic change of plans due to the political unrest in their home community in Guatemala. The man who has been a great employee working with us faces much uncertainty as this weekend he leaves his young family and makes the trip southward to Central America.
- A Swiss Village co-worker's family was evicted from their home, resulting in much heartache, soul-searching and despair. What does the future hold for them?

What sign might these neighbors of ours be hoping for? Who will be the messengers of this good news for them? Who will be the "angels?" (Greek: messenger). How might we bear the sign that God is with them? Into our world God gives us signs of the kingdom. Are we willing to recognize them? Or Are we afraid to look? (I know how hard this is for me to even write about.) Could it be that God's signs are waiting for us to notice? Maybe God's signs will take us by surprise just when we had made other righteous plans? Like

King Ahaz and Joseph, like our hurting community people, we are all people in need of a sign. At the same time, like Elizabeth and Mary, we are the people *entrusted to bear the sign*; the sign of God-With-Us.

“And this shall be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger...”

“And this shall be a sign for you...you will find...”:

- instead of blindness – we are discovering new horizons, sharing new vistas
- instead of lameness – the crippled places of our lives are being healed so that we can go places we couldn't go before to welcome others and share the news of this sign

“And this shall be a sign for you...you will find that...”

- instead of not being able to hear – we will hear new voices, ones we hadn't noticed or paid attention to before.
- our deadened places will raised to NEWNESS OF LIFE, “nothing will be impossible with God.” Luke 1:37
- like the shepherds...the outcasts really matter...the poor have good news brought to them – the good news of hope for a future.

“The word of the prophet is finding fulfillment. Emmanuel is arriving: God is with us. Outcasts have become a holy family. Rejected ones carry the promise of salvation. God widens the circle of acceptance to include us. Sometimes we may look silly. Sometimes someone might not understand. Surely God's face shines on us to strengthen us. Signs of grace and peace are ours to receive...” - Lavon Bayler

“Ask for a sign, the sign of God-With-Us. Ask for this kind of a sign... a sign that is...as deep as the grave, as high as the heavens...! (Isaiah 7:10)

AMEN