

4th Sunday of Advent (Cycle A)

December 19, 2010 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign
Blockin' up the scenery, breakin' my mind
Do this, don't do that! Can't you read the sign?

Some of you may remember that song.

We are surrounded by signs. Some of them are helpful, some hinder us from what we're trying to do. No Left Turn. Exit Only. One Way. No Parking. There are even a couple of signs out there on Hickory Crest Drive, across the street from church.

They remind me of a sign I saw in Milan, Italy. It said "Senso Unico," which I later learned means "One Way Street." But when I asked the desk clerk at the hotel what it meant, he said, "nothing." In other words, nobody paid any attention to them. I guess the signs over there are like that, right? Our need to park trumps any sign.

Some signs are necessary, some are puzzling. Back in my misspent youth, I remember going into a pool hall and seeing a sign that said, among other things,

No sunglasses.
No big hats.

Maybe you had to be there, I don't know.

We see so many signs, sometimes we tend to ignore them. Sometimes we want to ignore them. Sometimes we deliberately ignore them. Sometimes we even refuse to look at them, and deny that we see them. If we saw them, we might feel some obligation to obey them. Don't even ask the question. You might not like the answer. You might prefer making up your own answers.

MOVE

That was the situation King Ahaz found himself in. In our first reading, Ahaz was all in a dither about what to do. He and a couple of other kings went up to attack Jerusalem.

The Lord sent Isaiah out to meet Ahaz, and told him that his enemies were plotting against him – they had it in mind that either he'd make a deal with them or he'd be conquered himself. Ahaz was apparently pretty upset.

But the Prophet told Ahaz not to fear and stay calm. He tried to convince Ahaz to trust in the Lord. The Lord tried to give Ahaz a sign, but He wanted Ahaz to ask for it. "Ask a sign," He says.

But no . . . ! Ahaz refuses. "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test."

Sounds all humble and pious, doesn't it? Well, maybe not. Ahaz was a powerful king. He had his own plans. He wanted to do what he wanted to do. He'd rather rely on a whatever deal he could work out with his fellow kings than find out what God wanted him to do. He didn't want to know what God had in mind. You might say he was spiritually closed.

But he got a sign, whether he wanted it or not. It was a sign that didn't seem to have anything to do with the immediate situation at hand. Ahaz's sign was a prophecy that God will save Israel, the Chosen People.

A young girl will be found already with child. She will give birth and give the child a name which means "God is with us," Emmanuel. This child will continue the line of King David, which ensures that the kingdom will not fall to the invaders.

For all his earthly power, Ahaz got a sign of gentleness and weakness. But he couldn't see it, he wouldn't see it. Instead, he is conquered by the king he trusted to protect him. But of course, the line of David continued in accordance with the prophecy, in spite of Ahaz.

Ahaz was spiritually closed. He trusted only in his man-made treaty – his own power – and it failed him.

MOVE

Ah, but Joseph . . . that was another story.

We might wonder why Mary would be betrothed to Joseph if it was her intention to preserve her virginity. But in those days, it was customary for marriages to be arranged by parents. As an obedient daughter, Mary would have gone along with her parents' wishes. They did not know of the revelation that had come to her.

But she confided in Joseph. Even then, Joseph was uncertain what to do. As a “just man,” he was under an obligation under the law to denounce her as an unfaithful spouse. But he accepted his role in the Divine plan and took her into his home as his wife.

But look what Joseph does in our Gospel reading. On faith alone, he places his life in the hands of God. He trusts that he might have a part in the divine plan that is to be fulfilled. do not fear: This message of the angel confirms what he is to do.

Joseph was afraid. He felt himself unworthy, but God now tells him to accept the honor offered to him.

It's a revelation. A sign from God. And it came to him in a dream.

MOVE

I think dreams mean something. I've been reading a book in which the author calls dreams “God's Forgotten Language.” You can probably think of a number of times in Scripture when God spoke to people in dreams.

In the next few weeks, we'll hear how the Magi were warned by God in a dream to go home by another way. We'll hear the angel of the Lord speak to Joseph in a dream and tell him to “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.”

All of this was so that prophecy might be fulfilled.

Oh, they're not all signs from God – I think very few of them are.

But some of them are. I suppose we've all had the experience of going to bed worried or burdened about something. But sometimes we sleep, then awake with a clarity and sense of hope and peace that we couldn't find in the darkness of night. Maybe we're so bound up in our own search for solutions when we're awake that we can't hear God's solutions.

MOVE

I often remind my students that “one person talking keeps two people from listening” – from listening to me, that is. When we're awake, we're so busy telling God what we feel, what we want – we can't hear His answer. So He lovingly waits for us to go to sleep. Sometimes I think He waits for us to go to sleep so we'll shut up and listen for a change.

The incarnation and birth of Our Lord is not a one-way street. We don't passively receive our Savior. Like Joseph in today's Gospel, we have to respond, to act, faithfully and generously to the coming of the Lord. Joseph's response is an example to us. It teaches us that our own “Let it be done” to God's plan can have far-reaching effects in the lives of many other people.

So here's a sign, whether you want it or not.

Advent is a good time to put aside our own hopes, desires, ambitions – and watch for the sign, listen for the sign. The message may be very quiet and discreet, if we listen. Maybe we could use this last few days of Advent to bring our lives more fully into union with God's plan for us and for our world.

MOVE

The Winter Solstice is the longest, darkest night of the year. This year it's on next Tuesday, December 21, at 5:38 PM Memphis time.

This is already the darkest time of the year. It gets dark so early, the nights are so long. And this year there will also be an eclipse of the moon on that night, around midnight. It'll even darker than usual this year. But then, as we approach Christmas, the days will get just a little bit longer, the nights get just a little bit shorter, and the Light begins to come into the world.

MOVE

Here at Holy Spirit, the deacons usually preach on the 4th Sunday of Advent every year. It's kind of a Holy Spirit tradition.

Every year, I try to say this – if I don't, I mean to.

One of my favorite quotes is “Christmas is a holiday that persecutes the lonely, the frayed, the rejected.”

Jimmy Cannon said that. I think he was on to something there – “Christmas is a holiday that persecutes the lonely, the frayed, the rejected.” It gets dark so early, the nights are so long . . . more people feel lost, disconnected, isolated, out of place, out of time, than at any other time of the year. For a lot of people, Christmas is more Gethsemani than Bethlehem.

Christmas is a good time to renew family ties. It's a time to mend fences, bury old grudges, bind up old wounds – ask for forgiveness – grant forgiveness – renew broken relationships.

Christmas is also a blessed time for remembering . . . for our parish outreach ministry of “re-remembering.” We are seeking out the lost sheep, reaching out to those who might have wandered from the faith.

So Advent might be a good time for us to put aside our own hopes, desires, ambitions – and watch for the sign, listen for the sign, discern what our part in all this might be. The message may be very quiet – just a tiny whispering sound – but we might hear it, if we listen.

READINGS

Reading I

Is 7:10-14

The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying:
Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God;
let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky!
But Ahaz answered,
"I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!"
Then Isaiah said:
Listen, O house of David!
Is it not enough for you to weary people,
must you also weary my God?
Therefore the LORD himself will give you this sign:
the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,
and shall name him Emmanuel.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6

R (7c and 10b) Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

The LORD's are the earth and its fullness;
the world and those who dwell in it.

For he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD?
or who may stand in his holy place?

One whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean,
who desires not what is vain.

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

He shall receive a blessing from the LORD,
a reward from God his savior.

Such is the race that seeks for him,
that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

Reading II

Rom 1:1-7

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus,
called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God,
which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,

the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh,
but established as Son of God in power
according to the Spirit of holiness
through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Through him we have received the grace of apostleship,
to bring about the obedience of faith,
for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles,
among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ;
to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy.
Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel

Mt 1:18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.
When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph,
but before they lived together,
she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.
Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man,
yet unwilling to expose her to shame,
decided to divorce her quietly.
Such was his intention when, behold,
the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,
"Joseph, son of David,
do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.
For it is through the Holy Spirit
that this child has been conceived in her.
She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus,
because he will save his people from their sins."
All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:
Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means "God is with us."
When Joseph awoke,
he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him
and took his wife into his home.