

“This Will Be a Sign for You”

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2022

Westminster, Greenville

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I imagine that some of you here tonight have come from out of town to visit family. With the cold weather that's come our way this week, and the winter storm that hit other parts of our country, I hope those of you who traveled some distance to get here did not have a difficult trip.

But those kind of trips can happen, right?

I'm reminded on this Christmas Eve of a trip that the Presbyterian minister Rodger Nishioka once made. He was traveling to Debrecen, Hungary for a church conference.

But it quickly turned into ONE OF THOSE KIND OF TRIPS.

First, his flight to Budapest was delayed, and by the time his plane arrived it was too late to catch the bus that was supposed to take him to Debrecen.

So he decided to take a train.

He bought a ticket.

Got on the train.

When the conductor came over to ask for his ticket, he looked at the ticket and asked Rodger to get up.

I must be in the wrong seat, he thought.

No—he was in the right seat.

He was just on the wrong train.

So he manages to get to the right train, it leaves for Debrecen, and he's exhausted and he falls asleep.

A few minutes later a kind, older woman is elbowing Rodger to wake him up. Why is she waking him up? Because he fell asleep on this stranger's shoulder.

Then everyone in his compartment—there's maybe five other people in the compartment—they pull their food for lunch. Rodger didn't have time to buy food, so looks for the club car on the train.

Turns out there is no club car on the train.

Which means hours without any food.

He returns to his seat, tired and hungry and ready to curl up in a ball and go back to sleep.

It was turning into one of those kind of trips.

Have any of you ever had one of those kind of trips?

But then something happened.

The woman seated next to him noticed that he didn't have any food, so she took out an apple, sliced it, and gave half of it to him. The two older ladies sitting across from Rodger—they got out a bowl of stew and gave some their stew him.

There was a young woman who had a sandwich.

She cut it up into four pieces, gave one piece to Rodger.

It was ALL delicious.

Just what the doctor ordered.

Then the guy three seats over, he took out a glass bottle, uncorked it, and offered some to Rodger. Rodger had heard of a really good Hungarian dessert wine, and he thought that's what this was...so he took it, and tasted it...and it was not dessert wine.

It was some type of Hungarian moonshine that this guy had clearly made on his own.

So when Rodger tasted it, he spit it back out!
He went “Pahhh!”

And all those strangers riding with Rodger thought this was the funniest thing in the world.

They started imitating him, laughing: Pahhh, pahhh!

The rest of the trip, whenever there was an extended silence in their compartment, someone would just randomly go, “Pahhhh,” and everyone—including Rodger—would break up laughing.

By the time they arrived at Debrecen, the whole tenor of the trip for Rodger had changed. Everyone hugged him, the gentleman with the moonshine found Rodger a cab that would take him to his hotel...

Reflecting on that trip years later, Rodger Nishioka wondered whether “Pahhh” wasn’t just his reaction to some disgusting drink.

He wondered whether it was a sign from God.¹

In the hospitality of those strangers, was it was God’s way of telling him that he was not alone, that God was with him on his journey?

I wonder if you’ve ever experienced something like that before.
I don’t mean difficult travels or Hungarian moonshine.

¹ As told by the Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka, in his sermon, “Tasting Faith,” preached at Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, KS, on August 7, 2022.

I mean have you ever experienced a sign from God, something that made you wonder whether God was telling you that God was with you, walking by your side at some point along your journey?

I ask because that's what happens in our story from Luke tonight. The shepherds receive a sign:

“...to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

This will be a sign for you...

Let's unpack that a little bit.
Are you ready for a little Bible study on Christmas Eve?

There's THREE PARTS to this sign.

A child.
Wrapped in bands of cloth.
Lying in a manger.

Let's start with the second part—the bands of cloth.
How many of you recall the King James version of this passage?
The one that says the child was wrapped in “swaddling clothes”?

It's a more poetic way to say it, but bands of cloth is technically more accurate, and it points us to something important. Because there's another time in Jesus' life when he is wrapped in bands of cloth.

At the end of Luke's Gospel, right after the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea takes Jesus' body, and Luke tells us that he “wrapped it in a linen cloth.”

The bands of cloth at the beginning of his life...are foreshadowing the linen cloth at the end of this life.

The next part is the manger. Don't overlook the manger.

As the biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine notes:

In Jesus's day, a "manger [was] not just a bed of straw; it is a feeding trough...Mary places her baby where food is found; how appropriate, for this baby will later take 'the bread...saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"²

Do you see what's going on here?

Luke is foreshadowing the end of the story at the beginning of his story.

He's pointing to Easter light in the midst of Christmas light!

And perhaps we see that light most clearly with the first part of the sign.

When Luke says that the sign for the shepherds is a newborn child, he's echoing the prophet Isaiah.

It's the Old Testament text we heard tonight, from Isaiah 9:6.

"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us..."

Well known words, right?

Think Handel's Messiah:

For unto us a child is born....

But as familiar as those words are, what's not as well-known is their context.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019.

Just two chapters earlier in Isaiah, King Ahaz of Judah has the Assyrians breathing down his neck. He's in trouble, his people are in trouble, they're about to get plowed over...and Isaiah brings him a message.

Isaiah says that God will give Ahaz a sign:

“Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel,” which means “God is with us.”

I can just imagine Ahaz's reaction:

That's my sign?

A baby will be born?

I've got enemies ready to run over me.

What I need is more firepower.

What I need is 10,000 more soldiers.

THAT would be a sign that God is with me.

And yet, according to Isaiah, God's love shows up—in a helpless and vulnerable child. In other words, God comes to us, not when we are powerful, but when we are powerless. Not in a moment of victory, but in our times of vulnerability.

That's the Christmas message Luke wants us to hear.

It was five years ago that my father's twin brother, my uncle, died shortly before Christmas. He made his home in the Houston area, and both of his daughters, my cousins, have made their homes in Texas as well.

Shortly after he died, there was this unusual snowfall in parts of Texas that don't usually get snow. It snowed in College Station that year, where one of my cousins lives.

And she posted on Facebook how her then 12-year-old son—
my uncle's grandson—loved the snow.

And how her son, after his grandfather died,
asked his grandfather, my uncle, to send them some snow.

And then...a day or so later...it snowed.

“Just a few flakes here in College Station to let us know Dad's watching”—that was what my cousin posted on Facebook that night about her dad.

Now...I do not believe that my uncle caused a snowfall to occur that evening in Texas. But I do believe that God can work through anything and anyone God chooses, to give us a sign of God's love.

Angels, shepherds, mysterious snowfalls...or a child born to a poor, Jewish couple, far from home...or even a Roman instrument of death. God can even take a cross—and make it a sign of NEW LIFE, of God's sovereign dominion of love.

God can choose whatever God wants to show the power of God's redeeming grace and love.

The poet Emily Dickenson once wrote:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind.³

Have you ever experienced the love of God that way?

Not directly, but indirectly?

At a slant...in a sign?

A number of years ago, a church group gathered to talk about times in their lives when God was close and very real.

“One member of the group was a dancer in a professional ballet company. When it came time for her to speak, it was clear that she was more comfortable as a dancer than as a speaker.

She spoke haltingly, with hesitation.

She reminded the group that she was raised in that particular church. She described the sanctuary, including the baptismal font, and she said that she was baptized as an infant right in that very font.

She did not remember this, of course,

but she said that her father was very proud at that moment

and that when she was a little girl,

he would often tell her of the Sunday that she was baptized.

He would describe the baptismal dress that she wore,

he would remember what hymns were sung

and what the minister had said in the sermon,

and he always ended the story by clapping his hands together and exclaiming, ‘Oh, sweetheart,

the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!’”

³ [Tell all the truth but tell it slant — \(1263\) by... | Poetry Foundation](#)

She never forgot what her father said.

In fact, “as a child, she would go to worship on Sunday with her parents and wonder, **‘Where is the Holy Spirit in this church?’**”

She would look at the brass organ pipes,
 at the rafters in the ceiling,
 at the stained-glass windows,
 and she would wonder,
‘Is that where [they keep] the Holy Spirit?’

Then she paused, and said, “As many of you know, I lost both of my parents to cancer in the same week, a terrible week, last winter.

During that awful week, on a dark, Wednesday afternoon, I was driving home from visiting my parents in the hospital, and I was passing by the church.

I felt an intense need to pray, and so I came into the church and sat in one of the back pews and I prayed and poured out my grief to God, and cried from the bottom of my heart.

A member of the church [she gave her name] was in the kitchen preparing a meal for a church meeting, and she saw me praying and knew what was happening in my life. She took off her apron, came and sat beside me in the pew, held my hand, and prayed with me.

‘It was then,’ the young woman said, **‘that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in this church.’**”⁴

⁴ This story is told by Thomas G. Long in his book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Because it wasn't just a church member holding her hand, right?
It was God.
That was clear as could be.

You know what else is clear as can be?

Long ago, God gave some shepherds, somewhere outside of Bethlehem, a sign of God's love. And that sign wasn't just meant for those shepherds.

It was meant for you.

God...is holding onto you!

With a love that dazzles too deep for words.

With a promise that in the most vulnerable,
and helpless part of your life ...
Jesus Christ will be born anew.

Amen.