

Prayer of Preparation: *Word of God, visit us this day as the angel visited Joseph. Give us ears to hear your word and hearts of grace to be the sign you have called us to be.*

We are always looking for a sign. Think about it...Noah and a rainbow in sky. Noah's rainbow was thousands of years ago and people still look for rainbows after the rain. People look for the rainbow as a sign of God's promise to us.

Next, we have the cross. People look for crosses as a sign that a church or a Christian is nearby. People look for crosses because they are a symbol of a place or a people who will offer help.

We have the butterfly...to signify rebirth. Butterflies signal the ultimate rebirth...a beginning as something ugly, a metamorphosis and poof...something beautiful.

I've seen people looking to the sky for cardinals...a sign that those we have lost will live forever. People will search the skies after they lose their loved ones in search of a cardinal...a sign that their loved ones are in heaven.

People are always looking for signs. Across cultures, across the ages, people are always looking for signs. Hear, with a fresh ear, the words of the Lord spoken by the prophet Isaiah: *Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.*

Judah is in the middle of a war. Yes, *Judah is always in the middle of a war*, and King Ahaz must make some difficult decisions about who to trust and what to do. King Ahaz has something, someone, the other side doesn't have. King Ahaz has Isaiah. Isaiah speaks into the direness of the situation and says to King Ahaz: ask the Lord for a sign. While King Ahaz says no...I'm not putting God to the test, Isaiah, the prophet, cast a vision of Immanuel, *God is with us*.

For King Ahaz, Isaiah spoke of a future for Judah. For King Ahaz, Isaiah spoke of the birth of a child which would begin the count down for their enemies to be conquered. For King Ahaz, Isaiah spoke of salvation for him and his people right then and right there. Isaiah spoke of two to three years in which the people of Judah would be delivered from their enemies: the nations of Aram and Israel. Isaiah spoke of peace. A peace that did come to Judah but a peace that would be short term followed by a return to war.

But for us, Isaiah cast a vision of a future in which a young woman would have a child and that child would bring peace to all people. Isaiah cast a vision of a future of peace for all of us. Isaiah cast a vision of peace for all of us for all time.

Hear the words of the psalmist echoing throughout time and eternity: *Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

The psalmist wrote this song in a season of distress: restore us O Lord God of hosts. Restore us to being one people. Restore us to being *your* people. Restore us to a place and a time when there was no north or south, no east or west, no up and no down. Restore us to a time when we were siblings, restore us to a time when we were family and friends. Restore us to a time in which my neighbor and I lived together in peace. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts.

Isaiah saw a time of peace. The psalmist pleaded for restoration. I think that what both Isaiah and the psalmist were looking for was Immanuel, God is with us. I think that both Isaiah and the psalmist were searching for a Messiah; one who would bring peace and the restoration of humanity to the image of God. I think that when Isaiah says, God is with us, that it means more than that God is on our side during a war. I believe that when Isaiah says, God is with us, that God is with all of us.

I believe that God is with us through thick and thin, through good and bad. I believe that God is with us when we are right and when we are wrong. I believe that God is with us when we are sick and when we are well. I believe that in all places and in all times that God is with us...all of us. All of us: the wealthy, the middle class, and the wretchedly poor. All of us: the oppressed, the distressed, the unhoused, the drug addict, the mentally ill, and the well...all of us. I believe that God is God of all races, cultures, countries, and peoples. I believe that in all places and in all times that God is with all of us.

I started this sermon with folks who are looking for a sign. Can I tell y'all something...we've had that sign for thousands of years. We don't need butterflies. We don't need rainbows. We don't need cardinals. We need to remember that God is with us. God has always been with us. God will always be with us.

My children are looking for a sign that Christmas is coming...for us it's Luther Vandross singing the Christmas album. Usually, after Thanksgiving dinner the album goes on and it's time to start putting up the Christmas decorations. I love that album and I play it every Christmas without fail. Over and over. That's my sign to my family that Christmas is coming.

But we, as followers of Christ, are called to a different sign. And in the end, we are called to *be* a sign.

If you want to see a sign that God is with us, look around...see God at work in you and around you. See the work of God transforming you into God's own image of peace, hope, joy, and love. Look around and see the work of Christmas being fulfilled: the naked being clothed, the hungry being fed, the unhoused finding shelter, families being restored, the sick being healed. If we really want to see that God is with us, we must become the people who do God's work in as many ways as we possibly can. When we become the people who love, honor, and serve for Christ's sake, *we* become the sign that God is with us.

I believe that we have the power to name peace, hope, love, and joy into being. I'm talking about the peace, hope, love, and joy which comes with work...a whole lot of work. I believe that we have the power to be God's vision as told to us through the prophet Isaiah. I believe that we become the sign the world is looking for when we make choices each day to be at peace with each other. Not the, "oh, I'm not going to say anything about that" peace...that's not really peace; that's kicking the can down the road until it explodes. I'm talking about casting a vision in which everyone works together for the common good and lays aside the sense the words "I and me" to become a community which embraces "we."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, family of God, I believe that when we look in our hearts we will see that it is we who are the signs that God is with us.

Response to the Word: *God of grace, you put on flesh and come to live among us. You make us new in a million ways each day. You never hesitate to become small and vulnerable, fitting into each heart, each life. May your word fit into our hearts this day, and may it grow until it is born anew in our lives, ready to make us whole once more.*