

Signs of Christmas  
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Memphis, like a lot of cities in this world, has signage problems. Just about four years ago, Ardelle and I were late to a meeting with Bill Craddock. And my recollection is that confusing signage was at least partly to blame.

We were still living in Little Rock and were so confident we would for a while longer that we'd refinanced our house that December. But by the end of the month, we were driving to Memphis for breakfast with Bill to consider considering my entering Calvary's search process for a rector. The meeting was at Cafe Eclectic on McLean, which is a short walk from our house now, but we didn't understand Memphis parkways yet. Is it confusing to no one else that North Parkway runs east and west? Which means that if you're traveling east when it turns into Summer, take a righthand turn and you'll be traveling south on East Parkway North. Is that not weird signage for an out of townner to navigate?

Some signs in Memphis are seemingly invisible. Like the crosswalk marker in the middle of the road at McLean and Overton Park, which gets knocked down the day after some dutiful streets department employee has reinstalled it. Sisyphus had a more fulfilling job. Or like the one that tells you how to enter westbound Sam Cooper from Perkins. By the time you see it, it's too late to change lanes. For the first year we lived here I'm convinced it would have saved time just to pull into Mortimer's for a drink and directions each time I passed that way.

Large or small, confusing or clear, frustrations with signage arise from our expectation of what a sign is supposed to do. A sign in our world is supposed to declare clearly and plainly where we are. Or which way to turn. Or what we can expect to find going on underneath it. They say things like, "Stop" or "Yield" or "Detour." Or maybe "Girls, Girls, Girls!" And they're meant to mean only and exactly what they say.

Signage is no place for metaphor, then. But speaking metaphorically, does anybody else feel like 2020 has been a long, tedious trip down an interstate where the road signs have all been removed? I mean, if you were watching Downton Abbey for the first time right now, and the Dowager Countess asked, "What is a weekend?", would she still come off as a toffy-nosed aristocrat or would she sound like our Yoda? So many of the old markers really did just go away, didn't they?

There are signs in the Bible too, you know. But if signs in our world make official proclamations, signs in the Bible are intimations. They are hints that something more is going on here than what meets the eye. Openings of the ordinary into what is eternal, indescribable, or divinely strange.

When Jesus turns water into wine, it doesn't only mean that the bar at the wedding reception is open again. Or when he heals a hemorrhaging woman or casts a demon out of a man and into a herd of swine, these didn't mark the end of all sickness or madness. Signs in the Bible always point beyond themselves, don't they? If they declare anything clearly, it's that in this place, this person, this moment, reality is packed more densely with meaning than our little temporal imaginations can take in. "But try," they say to us. "Try to take more of this in than you think you can. Try not to let only what is obvious or plausible set signposts at the limits of what you believe can be."

There's a sign in the Nativity story as well. But it's oddly placed.

The story begins with a decree by the emperor who's in charge of all the known world: Augustus, who had a governor named Quirinius carrying out his will down in Syria. An emperor's speech is official speech.

Clear, direct, authoritative as a traffic sign. If the emperor says stop, you stop. If he says go to your ancestral town to be registered, you go. If he says you'll be taxed, as the fine old King James Version had it, you will be taxed. And so Mary and Joseph are on the road to Bethlehem, not because they're following a star or mystically drawn, but because they've been ordered there.

But in just a few sentences, St. Luke takes us from the palace of Augustus to this woman who's just given birth in a barn. Everything's described simply and plainly. Here's who's in charge. Here's where the young couple were traveling to and why. And here is an ordinary human birth in extraordinarily sad conditions.

It's all very matter of fact...until it's not. The shepherds are ordinary, but not the angel of God standing before them. Not the terrifying glory shining all around or the sudden appearance of a multitude of the heavenly host, singing "Glory to God in the highest!"

It seems we've moved from the realm of official declarations to the realm of the mysterious and the supernatural. Surely these are the biblical signs that there is more to this scene than the birth of a child.

But we're told the sign is not in the sky. It's not in the angel or the shining divine glory or the army of heaven singing praise to God and peace on earth. What we're told is, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Luke takes care to show us the sign we're meant to dwell on is in the smallest, weakest, most vulnerable creature in the whole tableau he's just assembled. A baby, shivering against the cold as his mother wraps him up in strips of cloth. Her sad, inadequate, maybe desperate attempt at reconstructing the womb where the child had everything he needed, pieced together out in a world where it's clear he does not. "Right here," says Luke. "Here's the sign. It's the baby."

There's meaning built into the shape of this story. We still like to make God out to be an emperor, seated on a throne, running the universe from on high. But Luke sets the emperor up at the not-God end of the story, ordering people around, but oblivious to the happenings in Bethlehem, which end up being why you and I hear his name read once a year in church.

But God is just as clearly not with the angels either. All of their splendor and all of their songs direct the shepherds' attention and ours away from the heavens, and down to the child. To the sign. To the mystery that *this* is how God is coming to us. Small. Vulnerable. A bleating bundle of need.

This is the sign, in a Bible full of signs. Signs that are not meant to satisfy us, but to draw us into the ways God has come to us over time. And Incarnation is the sign in which we meet God down at the broken and ordinary end of things where we live.

Jesus will grow up and teach the way of Incarnation. People will come to him to have their questions settled. How should we live? Which way should we go? What must we do to be saved? And if you read his responses, time and time again, he refuses to settle their questions. He responds in ways that turn people back to their own lives. He tells them to give to anyone who asks you for anything. Twice as much, actually. He tells them to forgive more times than you can count. He tells a man to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor. Says that's what he needs to do to be saved.

Look at the teachings. The parables. The shape of his whole life. They don't actually add up to a neat moral system that it's humanly possible to live out. But they do turn us back, again and again, to the workings of our own hearts. Their hates and their grudges. Our disordered loves and longings. Our evasions and illusions. Jesus turns us truthfully back to our lives. Which sounds like terrible news to anyone who just wants Jesus to be a road sign pointing the way to eternal life in heaven.

But the way of Jesus is not bad news if the story of his birth is to be trusted. If it sets the whole stage for how God comes to the world. Which is to say that God comes to the world through lives very much like ours. We miss Jesus when we search for him off in the halls of power or even with the angels in the heavens. We miss him when we look for him anywhere else but where we live.

The mystic, theologian, and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, told the story of a man who walks into an antique shop filled with expensive and beautiful things. The man seems very out of place there. His

clothing is worn, if clean. His coarse hands and sun-chapped skin make plain that he's a laborer. And after several long and careful visits to the shop, he chooses a beautiful piece of old glass and tells the owner he'd like to make a down payment on it.

Each week the man returns with a small payment until finally the treasure is his. As he's about to leave with his purchase, the curious shop owner asks what plans he has for the object.

"I bought it for my little room," the man says. "It isn't much, but I bring to it, from time to time, through the years, only the very best and most beautiful things. You see, that is where I *live*."

Friends, this has been a hard and heartbreaking year for so many of us. The rhythms of our lives have been completely disrupted. We have been cut off from people we love, from the familiar forms of worship that would sustain us in such times. Here at Calvary we lost seven of our own in just six weeks as a hard year came to a close, which means some of us are navigating these holidays with grief that is fresh, consuming, seemingly unsurvivable some days, I suspect.

And now, on Christmas Eve, I find myself standing in the Calvary pulpit preaching again to these rows of empty pews. Does it not make sense that some of us might like to be anywhere else except where we live right now? Maybe like Mary, who had to wonder why, of all nights, did she have to be pregnant on this one.

But a sign was born to her. A sign not that God delivers us from our lives, but that Jesus turns us truthfully back to our lives, because that is where he still meets us. Where we live. The small, humble, ordinary places where we live.

And maybe this humble service tonight, that frankly looks almost nothing like the one we were dreaming up for the Levitt Shell, but a service so many others like you are gathering around, praying with you, singing into their computers at a kitchen table or on a sagging old couch... Maybe this Christmas Eve service can be one of those best and beautiful things you bring to the small room of your life. A preparation. A sign, even. An opening of the ordinary into the eternal. This healing, hopeful Christmas mystery, that it really is to lives like yours, just as they are, that Emmanuel still comes. All he asks of us is that we be, not in the clouds, or at the emperor's, but at home, where we live, when he does.