

**“Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign”**

Genesis 9:8-13; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Today’s ‘copious’ readings from Scripture are filled with images related to God’s relationship with His people. Noah’s Ark. The Flood. Baptism. A Dove. God’s Voice. All of these are representations... SIGNS... of how the Divine Mystery of God has interacted with the also sometimes ‘mysterious’ behavior of Humankind. And as I reflected on these various ‘signs’ of God’s interaction with Man, a classic rock song from the 70’s came to mind. I know... SHOCKER! (Well, it hasn’t helped that we had let our satellite radio subscription lapse, and I’ve been listening to local stations that feature 70’s rock. I DID, however, find GREAT **theological value** to some of the songs I listened to on my way to Welsh this week: From the group “Bread” (as in, ‘of Life?’), the song “*Everything I Own*”, which talks of being ‘sheltered from harm’... being ‘set free’... being ‘taught how to love’... of how ‘you gave my life to me.’ Elton John’s “*Levon*,” which refers to the NY Times saying “God is dead.” (Which relates to the recent hit song and movie “God’s NOT Dead.” Emphasis on ‘NOT!’) Bill Withers’ “*Lean On Me*” (GREAT message... and is true for both horizontal AND vertical relationships!). And my favorite from this trip, a 1985 hit by the band “Mr. Mister,” from their ‘album’ “Welcome to the Real World”... “*Kyrie Elieson*.” Which means, “Lord, have mercy.” SEE, you can find God in some of the most UNUSUAL places, if you just look... even on an ‘oldies’ radio station...)

BUT, back to our ‘Signs.’ The Biblical ones which reminded me of a line from a song I started to mention (MUCH) earlier: “**Sign, sign, everywhere a sign.**” (Did you notice the Prelude that Joey played?) Now, while we all basically know  $\gg$  just what a sign is, ‘just for fun’ I’d lift up this definition: “*an **object, quality, or event** whose **presence or occurrence** indicates the **probable** presence or occurrence of **something else.**” One thing that **points to**, or **represents**, another. (I particularly like the sentence that was given as an example of this words usage: “Flowers are often given as a **sign** of affection.” Quite appropriate, wouldn’t you say... given the day that we celebrated just this past Wed... Valentine’s Day, in case you missed it. ;) Flowers certainly can ‘indicate the probable presence’ of love... OR guilt... )*

Here's an example of the 'signs' that are especially meaningful this week. Can you tell what I'm holding in my hand? **A Baby**. A 'sign' that represents a... **King Cake**. Which reminds us of... **Mardi Gras**. A day which marks the end of the carnival season, and points to the very next day... **Ash Wednesday**. Which is the beginning of... **Lent**. Which, of course, takes us to... **Easter**. The day that is supposed to be all about... **Jesus**. The Son of God who came to earth as a tiny... **Baby**. 'Sign, sign, everywhere a sign.' That whose presence points to another...

So how do the 'signs' we encounter in these passages 'point' us to the 'presence' of God? How might they be seen as 'signs of His affection?' Well, the first one we find, in Genesis, is that of the **Rainbow**. That 'sign' first given to Noah and his 'family of faith,' in which God declared that *"never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood..."* (Genesis 9:11)

A flood that was sent to cleanse the earth of the sin and iniquity that was so pervasive that only by wiping away His creation could God start with a 'clean slate.' The rainbow was the 'sign' that God would never choose this means of judgment again. (Though after recent hurricanes and flooding rains did such catastrophic damage in TX, LA, and other locales, some might have questioned whether or not God was going back on that promise!) And considering how 'pervasive' that evil is TODAY, God's recurring judgment of water might not be so far-fetched...

What the Genesis story should remind us is that God is indeed mighty in power, with the ability to exact great power in His judgment on a wayward people... BUT that those who seek to be faithful to Him will be saved. And that God also gives wisdom to those who trust in Him... not matter what others may say. Noah sure received more than his share of ridicule for following God's will.

That, despite what any talk show host may say, faith in God does NOT constitute 'mental illness.' Quite to the contrary, I would suggest that NOT to have faith in God can lead to 'illness' of the 'mind'...

Just as the rainbow was a sign of God's salvation from judgment, so too is >> the Sacrament of **baptism**. In the same way that Noah and his loved ones were afforded deliverance from death by 'passage through the waters' of the flood, so too are we promised

deliverance to LIFE by 'passage through the waters' of baptism. God's covenant promise to Noah was evidenced by a rainbow. God's covenant promise to us is evidenced by the 'sign' of baptism... which points us to the person of Jesus. Just as Noah turned away from sin, coming through the 'whelming flood' to be delivered to safety, Jesus made clear the importance of being washed of our iniquities, and acknowledging that 'only in God will our souls be at rest.' The man who knew no sin yet participated in that symbolic cleansing to lead by example.

That is why both the font and the Table are so important for us to focus on in our worship. That as we remember Jesus' baptism, we should remember our own. That, in the words of one of our hymns, *"At the Font we start our journey."* A journey that takes us to the Cross... with a broken body and shed blood to wash us of our sins... and culminates at an empty Tomb. The body and blood we remember at the Table. Ours is a journey whose ultimate end was well-described by Peter: ***"For Christ suffered (and died) for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God."*** (1 Peter 3:18) Rather than drown in the sorrow of our own weaknesses, our heavenly Father sent his only begotten Son... in order to bring us to God. Much more than any 'flowers' we may bring to put on the cross at Easter, the **Jesus** who hung on that cross is God's ultimate 'sign of affection' for us.

Mindful of how much our God loves us... and the ways that He 'signifies' that love... what about US? What 'signs' do we offer in return for God's great love? One way we demonstrate our gratitude to God is this holy season of **Lent** that we just began this past Wednesday. A time of 'preparation' in which we take note of the ways we have failed our God... confessing our faults before God, and our desire to, in Jesus word's, ***"repent and believe the good news."*** (Mk 1:15) Lent is our 'sign' to God that we indeed appreciate the gift of His forgiveness... made flesh in His Son Jesus. That as demonstrated by the sign of ashes, an age-old symbol of mourning and sorrow, we regret all the ways that have hurt God.

The ways that we 'betray' our Lord Jesus, and 'kill' His Spirit...with our **words**, and **actions**... OR, with our **silence** and **IN-action**...

So what else can we do to express our gratitude to God besides a 'sign of the times' that we spend with Him this Lenten season? Well, I would suggest that what we can give as a sign of God's affection for us, and for His other children, might be something as simple as a spoken

word. Do you remember what God said at the time of Jesus' baptism? ***"You are my beloved Son. With you I am well-pleased."*** (Mark 1:11)

Now, I personally think that these are some of the most beautiful words in Scriptures. But have you ever stopped to think just WHY these words were spoken? Do you think that Jesus was suffering from low self-esteem and just needed some words of encouragement? Do you think that our Lord Christ had any DOUBT that His Father loved him, and was 'well-pleased' with Him? Well, perhaps his human flesh needed a little boost. But *I don't think so*. I believe that this affirmation was expressed for OUR benefit. That if Almighty God would make the effort to express aloud, for 'God and everybody' to hear, just how loved and >> pleasing His Son was to Him, **how much more should you and I express OUR appreciation to those WE love?**

We live in a hypercritical society, where 'good news is no news.' An old saying from my youth has seemingly been all but forgotten: *"if you can't say something GOOD... don't say anything AT ALL."* That is one reason that I SO treasure the foundational premise for our Thursday morning Men's group: ***"Finally brethren, whatever things are true.. noble... just... pure... lovely... of good report; if there is any virtue, and if there is anything praiseworthy, meditate on THESE things."*** (Phil. 4:8) My friends, I think that we need a LOT more of 'good' and 'lovely' in our world today...

As beneficiaries of the unconditional love of Christ, we are called to pass that same type of love on to others. NOT based on whether they always ACT lovable or not. That just as Jesus could look those who were persecuting him, even as he hung from a torturous cross, and say ***'forgive them Father'***, so too should we be able to overlook those hurtful ways we are treated to say to another member of our flawed human family, 'I still love you. That despite your flaws, there is still much that is pleasing to me, and to God.'

THAT would truly be a 'sign' to others, and to your God, that you are seeking to be a faithful follower of His. It is that kind of unconditional love that makes YOU a 'sign' of 'the church'... that body of believers called to be a 'sign' to the world...

And finally, in speaking of 'signs' and the 'church,' I would leave you with a closing stanza of the song I referenced at the beginning of the service:

*"And the sign said, "Everybody welcome. Come in, kneel down and pray"*

*But when they passed around the plate at the end of it all*

*I didn't have a penny to pay*

*So I got me a pen and a paper and I made up my own little sign*

*I said, "Thank you, Lord, for thinkin' 'bout me. I'm alive and doin' fine"*

May we, as Christ's body known as the church, always be known to be a place where all are welcome to come in and pray... and where one's worth is not related to their ability to 'pay'. Just as Jesus is *'at the end of it all,'* may you all continue to be 'sign' of God's love to a broken and hurting world. May our lives be a living, breathing, **speaking** testimony of gratitude to God: 'Thank you Lord, for thinking about me. *Because of Jesus, I'm alive, and doin' fine...*' And may all God's children say, 'AMEN!'

#### CHARGE

After Jesus has received His Father's affirmation that he was 'beloved,' in whom he was 'well-pleased'... along with John's Baptism, a great spiritual 'high'... what happened? ***"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.<sup>13</sup> He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."*** (Mark 1:12-13)

Like Jesus, after this time of being reminded of God's love, being pleased with our worship, we are going to be 'immediately driven out into the wilderness' that lies outside those doors. We too will face temptation by our adversary Satan. We too will be with some 'wild beasts.' BUT, may we know that we too will have 'angels waiting on us.' As we go forth to 'wade in the water' of our everyday life, we know that we do NOT go alone. That the Spirit of the living God...