

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Sign from Below

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas has a way of bringing out the spectacular. Over-the-top light displays on neighborhood houses. Parades with massive and elaborate floats. Large-scale holiday television productions. Mouthwatering feasts offering the finest dishes imaginable. Flashy concerts by today's top artists. 'Tis' the season for the extravagant.

Sometimes the church is no exception. A Texas megachurch recently made the news, and generated online backlash, for its lavish Christmas presentation that included "drummers with full-body LED outfits soaring through the air, attached to cables moving up and down suspension tracks attached to the church ceiling. Dozens of dancers dressed in bright red outfits perform a tightly choreographed routine while dozens more musicians and singers blast music from a stage adorned with neon lights and puffing smoke machines."¹ Another congregation made waves across social media for a theatrical nativity that included an elephant in its cast of live animals.

If you were here during morning worship, you'll recall that our presentation of the story of Jesus' birth was more scaled down. It's amazing how some lumber and screws, borrowed household items, and cardboard cutouts, combined with some creative costuming, artistic imagination, and the faithful work of some dedicated leaders, can be used to retell the story of God's love-driven arrival to save the world. No spotlights or orchestras needed.

Granted, the shepherds experienced some divine illumination and heavenly music. But a lot of the rest of Luke's nativity story points to the ordinary, the unflashy. We might have expected more, especially after the angel tells the shepherds that they'll be given a sign. "This will be a sign to you" (v. 12). The very mention of the word "sign" stirs thoughts of divine communication, miraculous messaging. A sign involves more than just the human transmission of information from one person to another. "Sign" indicates that God has something to say. Some guidance to give, some direction to dispense, some truth to confirm.

In the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, God often confirms what he is about to do by providing a sign. Or in some cases, God provides a sign as proof or confirmation of what he has said. The sign verifies the truthfulness or trustworthiness of what God has proclaimed. So it is in our text from Luke. The shepherds will be given a sign that will not only help them identify the child by his location but will most of all authenticate the announcement that a Messiah has come. What they will see with their own eyes will be proof that God has sent a Savior.

Maybe the shepherds' first instinct was to expect something spectacular. They've already witnessed heavenly light blazing around them. Maybe the sign will be that kind of light, with a hundred times the intensity. Or since they've heard one angel choir, maybe the sign will be another angel choir, but this time with an orchestra added, and some celestial dancers striding across the clouds. Or maybe the sign will include some messianic

fireworks, smoke machines, marching bands, and flags. And who knows, maybe even some live animals.

Well, the shepherds got the animals part right, at least according to many of the nativity displays we use, where cattle, donkeys, and sheep watch over the infant Savior. But most of this heavenly sign was way more toned down than the shepherds, and we ourselves, might expect. Note that the shepherds weren't promised a political and military extravaganza. Instead, "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." So yes, God comes to rescue humankind, but he arrives completely helpless, as a newborn, delivered while his parents are on the road. What kind of coronation ceremony is that? What kind of Messiah/King is that?

Just over a decade ago, the BBC reported on Jose Mujica, the president of Uruguay. He held a unique position as "the world's poorest president." While many politicians are criticized for living in luxury while huge portions of the population they govern live in poverty, Mujica chose to identify with his people by living on a ramshackle farm situated on a dirt road outside the capital. This is the way a reporter described his approach to Mujica's lowly residence:

Laundry is strung outside the house. The water comes from a well in a yard, overgrown with weeds. Only two police officers and Manuela, a three-legged dog, keep watch outside This austere lifestyle—and the fact that Mujica donates about 90 percent of his monthly salary, equivalent to \$12,000, to charity—has led him to be labeled the poorest president in the world In 2010, his annual personal wealth declaration—mandatory for officials in Uruguay—was \$1,800, the value of his 1987 Volkswagen Beetle.²

What was also striking was that Mujica didn't have to live that way. The country provides a luxurious presidential residence in the capital city of Montevideo. But he chose to shun the privileges he had a right to enjoy so he could stand in solidarity with the people he was serving.

Christmas recalls the arrival of the world's true ruler, whose first residence, albeit temporary, wasn't in the capital city of Jerusalem but about six and half miles away in an obscure village. The accommodations were stark. Very possibly an indoor shelter in the home of some relatives, who made room in a space usually reserved for the family livestock. This was God's version of a royal residence. And where is the king's throne in this cramped, smelly palace? Why, look there, the monarch, tightly dressed in bands of cloth, is resting in a feed trough. If this is a sign from God, then clearly this God identifies himself primarily with the least and the lowly rather than the high and the mighty. This is where God would do most of his divine work.

Former pastor and editor Mark Galli says that many times we don't recognize Jesus because he comes to us in such humble, undramatic ways. He compares this to the situation that unfolds in Mark Twain's novel *The Prince and the Pauper*. There, says Galli,

... we are introduced to Prince Edward and a poor boy named Tom Canty. In the opening pages, they meet each other and discover they look identical. Since each one is dissatisfied with his social situation, they decide to swap places and see what life's like from the other side. Tom takes on the life of Prince Edward, and Prince Edward adopts the life of the pauper Tom. During the course of the novel, King Henry dies, at which point Prince Edward becomes King of England. For the rest of the story, Edward has to convince others that he is the legitimate king. All they see, of course, is a poor boy in rags.³

Only with God's help would the shepherds be able to see through the lowly conditions of Jesus' birth and recognize the promised Messiah. It takes divine intervention, opening the eyes of the heart, for us human beings to perceive the saving presence of God in the one whose birth we're celebrating here tonight. The glory of the Lord unveiled in what looks like very inglorious circumstances. Royalty dressed in rags.

Mary Ellen Ashcroff has written, "Searching high for God in mystical experiences, complicated revelations, asceticism, spiritual exercises? God is laid low, tucked under the mundane. Look down, not up—dig to find the treasure buried in your own backyard, called flesh."⁴ God promises the shepherds a sign that will confirm, a sign that will solidify for them, the truth of the gospel. And this sign itself will be very solid, God in the form of a newborn. To see this sign, the shepherds won't need to search the skies. They'll simply need to scan the terrain around them, right here on earth, where God has shown up in sovereign mercy. Look down, not up. That's where you'll see the sign.

The Salvation Army once had an advertisement, apparently designed for a billboard, that said, "IF YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR A SIGN FROM ABOVE, THIS IS IT." The notice went on to offer hope for a way out of addiction, with a phone number to call for help. Literally speaking, it was a sign from above, available to the eyes of those who drove by. But it was designed to point toward our ultimate source of deliverance, who himself has come here below, bringing redeeming grace to all.

"This will be a sign to you." God gives the shepherds a sign, and in that sign they meet Christ. And in that experience they themselves become a sign to Mary, confirming to her what she has already been told about the identity of her child. From there, the shepherds spread the word about this Savior, to the amazement of all who hear.

Retired pastor Lee Eclov tells about a couple in one of his churches first met a woman named Kim when she was giving out food samples at a store. According to Eclov,

They struck up a friendship. Kim was most definitely *not* a Christian. In fact, she called herself an angry atheist. But Jim and Evy invited Kim to their home and for her to ride with them to church. She came but she was locked and loaded! She never came off as angry, but she often dominated their Sunday School class with her questions. Some were honest. Some were just skeptical. And quietly, people prayed for Kim.

Gradually, she warmed up. She moved from angry atheist to agnostic. Her questions and objections just kept on coming. Months passed. Gradually she relaxed. Some questions were answered, and others dissolved. What mattered most for Kim was being around Christians, seeing our love for one another and for her. She liked the life of the church family, and we liked her spunk and smile.

Someone asked her to be an usher, and with her big smile and greetings, she was a natural. Meanwhile, God kept dropping little signs along her way—things that wouldn't have meant much to me but to her were divine messages. When she found a penny, with its motto, "In God we trust," she took it as a sign straight from God, and she found *lots* of pennies.⁵

Eclov says that eventually Kim came to trust Christ. He describes how, in various ways, the whole congregation participated in leading her to faith in the Lord. I like to think that in addition to those signs Kim was getting from pennies, the most important sign was the church itself, through its steady witness in word and deed.

"This will be a sign to you." Our world still needs signs of the truth of the gospel. Though our salvation comes from above, the surest sign of it showed up here below, in the lowly

and humble circumstances of Jesus' birth. And we ourselves, as followers of Jesus, are meant to be a sign from God, a sign from below. A sign to each other of God's sovereign love and God's kind of kingdom. A sign to others of God's redeeming grace. A sign to others of God's way of ruling the world.

¹ Michael Murney, "Dallas-area megachurch faces backlash for opulent Christmas show." Chron. December 16, 2023. <https://www.chron.com/news/article/texas-megachurch-prestonwood-18557125.php> (December 20, 2023).

² Vladimir Hernandez, "Jose Mujica: The world's poorest president." BBC News (November 14, 2012).

³ Mark Galli, "King Jesus the Disguised." Christianity Today. December 22, 2006. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/decemberweb-only/151-52.0.html> (December 21, 2023).

⁴ Mary Ellen Ashcroff, "Gift wrapping God." Christianity Today. December 8, 1997. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1997/december8/7te032.html> (December 21, 2023).

⁵ Lee Eclow, "The Unexpected Prayer." Preaching Today. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/your-soul/preacher-devotions/unexpected-prayer.html> (December 21, 2023).