

“Holy Signposts”  
Isaiah 35:1-10  
Matthew 11:2-11

December 12, 2010

Are you prepared yet? Or is there still a lot you have to do before Christmas? Do you know how many days are left before Christmas? Well, I know, because I downloaded the “Christmas App” to my iPod. There are 13 sleeps until Christmas. Or maybe some of you might know because you’ve been following along with your Advent calendar and opening the windows each day. Each day we open another window until we finally get to the last window and the baby Jesus. Well, I don’t know about you but as I consider how many days left in the countdown, my mind goes to one more thing: my to do list. Now there are some things crossed off, but many left to do – some highlighted in pink and green, some have stars and exclamation points next to them. How do we get it all done? What’s the plan? Sometimes I feel like I need a map, or even better a GPS system, to show me the **way**, where to go next.

Our passage from Isaiah this morning, the same one Jesus quotes from in the gospel reading, speaks of a “Holy Way,” a road leading to Zion, Jerusalem – God’s own homeland. Those who travel it won’t get lost, they will be safe from the threat of beasts attacking, they will walk it with joy and singing. Ideally these next couple weeks to Christmas we should approach with joy and singing. But I think too often we approach them with anxiety and worry, about things left to do or things we’re missing.

I don’t know about you, but there are many times in my life that I have felt off-track, lost. Maybe not attacked by wild beasts, but scared and threatened, or just down and lonely – wondering about the way ahead. One of those times was just recently in my life. Shortly after Gwendolyn was born, Clint and I discerned that we were ready to look for new directions in our ministry, to where God was calling us next. We had to listen, to wait. We both talked to churches, met with committees, and had interviews. It was rather scary, encountering new people and places, wondering if this was where God was calling us next. The way wasn’t particularly clear, there were many ways we could go! We had to listen, listen to ourselves, to the voices of others, and through all these the voice of God. I give thanks to God, as that leg of the journey is done, for all the ways God provided for me and all of us in the transition to this place. But I can tell you in the midst of it, things were very uncertain! I didn’t know where I was headed next! Some of you too may have shared in those feelings in your life, facing new

things, going through transitions. Even in this season that celebrates *hope, peace, joy and love*, I know there are people who feel off-track, that the way ahead is uncertain. It may not feel like a season filled with joy or singing, but filled with questions and doubts and worries.

I think that's where we meet John the Baptist today. Last week we met young John, a fiery preacher out in the wilderness, preaching repentance – a radical turning around of one's life, a redirection – and baptizing throngs of those who came to confess their sins. This week we meet John again, later in his ministry, having run into conflict with powerful King Herod, he sits in prison. And there, maybe he thinks to himself, "Uh oh, am I on the right track?" John sends message to Jesus, and asks, "Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?" Remember, just last week we heard John preach that the Messiah was coming that would baptize with FIRE! He had "his winnowing fork was in his hand, [he would] clear the threshing floor, gather the good wheat into the granary, and burn the useless no-good chaff with unquenchable fire." I think John may have been hoping that King Herod would get this fiery treatment, and he would get out of prison. But there John sat, asking himself, and wondering, "is this the way to go?"

Like John, there are times that we should ask ourselves, and even ask God too, not being afraid to question, "Are we on the right track, are we headed the right way?" And how do we know?

Though Jesus does not give John a straight yes or no to his answer, he tells his disciples to relay a message to John, "Go and tell John what you see and hear," the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news comes to the poor. These are signs of God's presence, that Jesus is truly God's Son, and that the Spirit and power of God rest with him. Not only because he works miracles – but notice **who** he works miracles for! The blind, lame, unclean, deaf, dead, and poor!

I think Jesus is reminding John and reminding us as well to look for the signs of God's presence among us. And it may not be where we expected to find it.

In January of 2007, *The Washington Post* videotaped the reactions of commuters at a D.C. Metro (subway) stop to the music of a violinist. The overwhelming majority of the 1000+ commuters were too busy to stop. A few did, briefly, and some of those threw a couple of bills into the violin case of the street performer. No big deal, just an ordinary day on the Metro. Except it wasn't an ordinary day. The violinist wasn't just another street performer; he was

Joshua Bell, one of the world's finest concert violinists, playing his multi-million dollar Stradivarius. Three days earlier he had filled Boston's Symphony Hall with people paying \$100 a seat to hear him play similar pieces. The question the Post author and many others since have asked is simple: Have we been trained to recognize beauty outside the contexts we expect to encounter beauty? Or, to put it another way, can we recognize great music anywhere outside of a concert hall?

Or perhaps the question is for us: Can we detect God only when God is surrounded by pews and candles, stained glass windows? Or can we celebrate Christmas only when we have trees, wreaths, lights, shopping, presents?

This past week it was my great pleasure to attend a gathering of the local Ministerial Association and to meet pastors from other churches in the area. It was a lunch meeting, but before we sat down to our meal, we gathered - standing in a circle around the Lord's Table. Before we shared the sacrament, we prayed and read scripture. The pastor hosting the meeting read from an Australian translation of Luke's gospel.

“Many years ago, the Roman Emperor Augustus gave orders for a census to be conducted throughout the whole empire. This was the first time it had been done while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Every man was required to go and register himself and his family in the town where he had been born. For Joseph, this meant traveling all the way from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. Bethlehem had been the home town of King David, and Joseph, being a descendent of David, had been born there too, so that was where he had to report. Joseph's fiancé, Mary, traveled with him to Bethlehem for the census. She was pregnant and the baby was due any day. There was no accommodation left anywhere in the town, so they ended up camping out in the stables behind the pub. Sure enough, she went into labor while they were there and gave birth to her first child – a baby boy. Mary wrapped the baby in cloth strips and made up a bed for him in a feed trough. The region around Bethlehem was sheep country, and that night there was a bunch of shearers spinning yarns around their campfire. Suddenly the whole sky lit up with the glory of God, and the Lord's messenger stood among them. They were scared, but the messenger said to them, “It's okay! There's no need to panic. I'm here with good news, news that will give everyone everywhere good reason to celebrate. A savior has just been born in David's town. He is God's chosen one, the Lord of all. Go and see for yourselves. You'll know you've found him when you see a baby wrapped in cloth strips and lying in a feed trough.”

We are used to hearing, “And this shall be a sign – you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” It sounds so pretty that way. But a baby, wrapped in strips of cloth, lying in a feed trough? As I heard those words, in a new and fresh way, it struck me what an ODD SIGN this was. Is that what you're looking for? I don't know that's what they expected.

What signs are we looking for? How do we recognize God's presence among us in this season that we welcome and celebrate God coming to live among us as one of us? What makes it

Christmas? Christmas lights or cookies or parties? What signs can we look for that God is truly here among us?

We should look for signs here and beyond our walls. I think of our involvement in Christmas Cheer, of youth and Session members that gathered on a Saturday morning to give their time and energy to pack boxes for the poor and needy in our community. The very people that Jesus promised the good news was coming to. And also our mission of the Angel Tree, and for so many of you who have bought and wrapped gifts. I even think of the Ministerial Association, that we can cross barriers to stand as brothers and sisters, regardless of denomination, and shared a common table. These are witnesses to God among us.

But where outside of church, in your lives, in your jobs, at school, in line at the store? Notice, look around, God is there. There is a song by Joan Osbourne, called "One of Us," and the refrain sang, "What is God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home." The good news of Advent is that God indeed came to live among us as one of us. God continues to dwell among us, let us look for the signs of God's presence truly among us – showing us the way, and leading us home. Amen.