

SEASON OF SIGNS
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From Isaiah 35
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We began this morning with the words of Isaiah – an ancient promise that there will be signs, Advent signs, hints that God is not finished with things. So these are days to stay alert....

In the half light of a cold, early Advent morning, you begin to scrape the frost from the windshield of your car. Only you pause long enough to notice that the frost has taken the form of this beautiful repeating geometric shape. It's as if there are hundreds of finely formed stars covering the glass. You recall that nature is filled with this phenomenon of simple shapes repeating to create beautiful complexity. Scientists call it "fractals."

And as the morning light makes the whole thing sparkle, it becomes a kind of parable of a deeper truth: that like the crystalline fractal mosaic on your windshield, there's an essential design and harmony and beauty to life. It's easy to miss amidst all our busyness and hurry, but our lives are part of a greater, Sacred Pattern – a mosaic of creation.

So you resume the scraping because the demands of the day are there. But you've been given a sign, a holy hint. It's as if God's fingerprints are all over your windshield. For it is Advent, the season of hints and signs, just as Isaiah promises. So these are days to stay alert....

You're decorating the tree, an ornament is in your hand, when your eyes suddenly fill with tears, and there's this terrible missing of the one who used to help you with the decorations. You just hold the ornament and feel this deep sadness about what once was and is no more, about what was supposed to be and was not to be.

But as you stand there, from somewhere deep comes this spiritual knowing that the sadness is okay, that you cannot get to the healing and peace of Christmas without allowing yourself to feel what still aches. And the ornament in your hand, and the tears in your eyes become signs, hints that the Holy One of the universe is also in the sadness, touching even the painful places in our lives.

For it is Advent, the season of such signs, just as Isaiah promises. So these are days to stay alert....

You're at your mailbox trying to figure out how to get one more can of green beans into the box already filled with other canned vegetables and packages of macaroni. For this is the day the mail carriers pick up donated food for Christmas baskets. You try to fit the last can in and "Ouch!" you cut your finger on the mailbox edge. You hold a Kleenex to your finger and glare at the mailbox.

And maybe it's the throbbing in your finger or the sight of the donated food, but something has triggered a string of questions in your head. These holiday acts of charity are needed and good, but why is there so much hunger in a land with so much wealth? Have the poor and the hungry chosen their lot? Are they just lazy, lacking in some essential human quality? Or are there systemic issues, economic and social injustices, advantages and power imbalances that create large disparities in wealth and consumption?

The bleeding in your finger has stopped, but the wondering hasn't. Am I living what I say I believe you ask yourself? Do I know how much is enough?

Do I have the right balance in my life between keeping and giving, consumption and generosity? What is my footprint on this earth?

By rearranging the macaroni, you can fit in the can of green beans and shut the mailbox cover. But it's also as if you've been given a sign of God's will of mercy and justice.

For it's Advent, the season of such signs. So it's best to stay alert....

It's late afternoon and the Mall is crowded – people with that look on their faces of too much to do and too little time. You wonder if someone is seeing that look on your face too. But there is a list in your hand and this the only time.

As you thread your way through the shoppers with a Muzak version of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” overhead, you see off to the side a child sitting on the floor, a terrified look on her face. She has obviously become separated from a parent.

You stop, bend down, and quietly ask, “Are you lost?”

She starts to sob. You sit down on the floor next to her and say, “I'll just sit here with you.” She nods and the sobbing becomes a quiet sniveling.

You don't know how long you sit there – five minutes maybe – it doesn't matter. Your to-do list is forgotten for now and you have this sense of being just where you're supposed to be.

Then the little girl sees the familiar face and she runs to the wide-eyed-with-fear mother, who scoops up the child in an embrace of relief and such love. The mother looks at you and mouths the words, “Thank you.” You wave as the mom carries the child away, the little girl peering at you with big brown eyes over her mother's shoulder.

And in that moment it is as if you have been given a sign. The lost child and the mother become another parable...of God's seeking love. That on days when we each feel alone and lost midst the hard things of life, there is a Presence – the Holy One who knows where to find us.

For it is Advent, the season of signs. So it's best to stay alert....

As you drive the familiar street home through the December darkness, you are enjoying the lights on the houses and front yard bushes and trees. Some are elegantly done with a careful eye to design. Others are not so elegant, with lighted candy canes and large flashing plastic snowflakes, and plywood Santas perched on garage roofs. And you think, surely there are things to criticize about the excesses of this before Christmas season, but not the lights. In this world there can never be too many lights in the darkness.

You recall that the early church with great intention placed Christmas in the darkest time of year. It was and is the church's way of saying that the dark realities of violence, war, hatred, famine, tragedy...that the darkness of human suffering does not mean that God has given up on the world, and that the promise of these days is the coming again of the One who will be our Christ Light.

As you drive, seeing the lights becomes almost mystical. The lights are drawing you into a sacred mystery that feels both wondrous and hope-filled. Everywhere you look on this December Advent night, the light of God shines in the darkness.

And for some reason you pull over and stop in front of a house with one little string of blue lights surrounding the door. It is the least impressive display on the whole block. But you think: Someone in that house did the best they could to bring light into the darkness.

And then you have this thought: Jesus is coming. And Jesus would have made himself at home with and loved the people in this house with the one little string of blue lights around the door.

And as you drive away you find yourself singing, “Come, come, Emmanuel.” For it feels like you’ve been given a sign, a hint that God is not finished yet.

And this is the season of such things. So it’s best to stay alert....