

Date: January 18, 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 2

SERMON: Signs of Glory

Text(s): Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

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In our travels over the years, I have frequently photographed interesting signs, particularly signs whose meaning is either ambiguous or funny. When we were on our way back to the States from Malaysia in 1976 for our first home leave, we stopped off in London for a week's vacation. Our children were quite small—ages 3 and 6, so the London Zoo was on our list of must-see places. As we wandered through the zoo on a fine June day, we noticed that wherever two or three paths came together there was a sign post with various signs telling you what animals you'd see if you went down each path. The one I stopped to photograph told us that down this particular path we would find British crows, birds of prey, toilets, and lost children. I kept looking for the cage full of toilets and the one full of lost children, but never found them.

Another sign whose meaning Carol and I have spent years pondering, was the sign over a small, bustling Chinese restaurant in Singapore. The sign over the door told us that the restaurant's name was "New Happy Sliced Pork." We've never quite figured out who was happy, or how the restaurant differed from the implied "Old Happy (or was it Unhappy) Sliced Pork." Not easy to figure out the meaning of that sign is it?

We often use the figure of speech, "a sign of the times," usually when we're making an unfavorable comparison of the way things are now with the way they used to be in the good old days. "The latest Atkins Diet fad is a sign of the times," or "The fact that Hollywood pitches all its movies at 14 year-old boys is a sign of the times." What the sign points to is not exactly clear, but what is clear is that "the times" we're speaking of are, in our rose-tinted memories, not as good as the times that are past.

Signs are like that. Sometimes they're clear like Stop signs; other signs are not always

clear. And yet signs are everywhere and we try to decipher them as best we can.

Both of our scripture lessons this morning are concerned with signs, particularly our gospel lesson, and in both, the signs are ambiguous. Both of them speak of the signs of God's presence and action in the world or in our lives. How do we know God is present with us, as we claim to believe? What signs can we see of that divine presence and help? Especially when, sometimes, it seems that God's presence is most conspicuous by its absence.

In our Old Testament lesson the prophet speaks to a group of people recently returned from exile in Babylon. Some seventy years earlier, Jerusalem and Judea had been conquered by the Babylonians and all the educated and leading citizens carried off into exile. Now, Cyrus the Persian, who had defeated Babylon has given permission for all former Babylonian captives to return to their ancestral homelands. The prophet tells them that this return is a sign of God's redeeming and liberating activity on their behalf, and that they should understand it in that light.

But it's a sign that's not obvious. Three generations have passed. They've returned to find their homeland devastated, towns and villages laid waste, the food supply meager because of the disruptions of farming by years of war and the heavy tribute laid upon them by their Babylonian overlords. God must have seemed more absent than present.

True, they were back in the land of their ancestors, but what did that signify exactly? In actual fact, many of them had found life down in Babylon not too bad. Many families had chosen to stay there— they had built new lives for themselves, married local women or men, had children, gotten jobs, much like immigrants do anywhere in the world.

I'm sure that some of the elders in the Somali community in Lewiston, dream of a time of return to Somalia if and when that country ever attains a stable peace and a reasonable economy. But I'm not so sure their children share that dream, and especially not their grandchildren.

They may have been forced by circumstances to leave home, culture, and the warm climate of Somalia behind to come to the snow and cold of Maine, but it's clear that they're here to stay. I doubt if fifty years from now any of them would regard an opportunity to return to Somalia as a sign from God.

But on the strength of the prophet's word, Israel was asked to believe exactly that— to trust that God was with them and would, in fact, bless them and re-establish them in their land. They were asked, in short, to live by faith in what they could not yet see— a reality seemingly contradicted by the ruin and devastation they saw around them.

In our gospel lesson, we see this concern for signs of God's redeeming presence even more explicitly. In fact, so prominent is John's concern for such signs that many scholars have referred to the first half of his gospel as "The book of signs." John's perspective on Jesus' ministry is that all of the words and deeds of Jesus are signs that reveal God's glory. And yet as we see in this story, those signs are not perfectly clear.

The story is set at a wedding feast, one of the most joyous occasions of human life. In the culture of Jesus' day, which was a culture based on categories of honor and shame, the duties of a host to provide adequate food and drink were a matter of honor. When the wine runs out at this wedding feast, it's so serious a matter, that the shame could attach to the host and his descendants for the next generation or two. His family could come to be known as the family that was too stingy to buy enough wine. This is a crisis of the highest order.

Jesus' mother, who, curiously, is never named in John's gospel, speaks to Jesus as though she has the expectation that he will do something about it, and this expectation is seen in Jesus' reply to her, "*What concern is that of ours?*" he says, "*My hour has not yet come.*" Whenever in John's gospel, Jesus speaks of his "hour" it is always a reference to Jesus' crucifixion as the

ultimate sign of God's glory—the place where God's presence will be most clearly revealed. In fact, John sometimes has Jesus refer to his crucifixion as "glorification." How much more ambiguous could a sign be than that— crucifixion signifies glorification?

Unlike the miracle stories in the other gospels, where the miracle itself is the main attraction, in John's gospel, something different is going on. There's no description of any public action on Jesus' part. He has a quiet word behind the scenes with the servants, instructing them to go fill up the jars with water. I don't know whether John intends us to see any significance in these particular jars or not. They were the jars of water set aside for the ritual washing of feet when guests came into the house. So if you want to make something out of the fact that the best wine came from foot-washing water, I suppose you could. But whether that's John's intention is anybody's guess. There are no magic words spoken, no dramatic gesture, no sense that anything out of the ordinary has happened. Apart from Jesus' mother, and the servants who fill the water jars, nobody even knows that a transformation in the water has taken place. All the chief steward, the host, and the wedding guests know, is that just about the time they're all feeling no pain because of the amount of wine they've drunk, suddenly the host breaks out his best vintage. It's as though after everyone has already downed a bottle or two of Beaujolais Nouveau, the host suddenly breaks out the Chateau Margaux 1985. It's hardly what the guests would expect, but nobody's going to complain. They just accept the fact that they've been given a special treat.

John then gives us his own slant on the meaning of this story. He says, *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.* John doesn't even refer to the changing of the water into wine as a miracle; he calls it a sign—a sign moreover, that revealed Jesus' glory.

What glory, and to whom is it revealed? Not to the host of the banquet. Not to the chief steward. Not, certainly to the guests. Presumably not to his mother, since she's the one who put Jesus up to it in the first place. So what kind of sign is it, then, and for whom is it a sign and what does it signify? The last phrase tells us, "his disciples believed in him." It was for those who had already committed themselves to follow Jesus. Whenever, in this gospel, that John uses the phrase "to believe" with Jesus as the object, he means to believe that in Jesus, God is present. This is a story that makes concrete that very theological and mystical statement in the prologue to the Gospel, "*The Word became flesh.*" To believe in Jesus, as John makes clear however, is not merely to give intellectual assent to the notion that God is present in Jesus. True belief, true faith demands a prior commitment to follow. To believe is to commit oneself to a way of life, to live out one's life in light of one's conviction that God's presence and glory have been revealed. To follow means staying with Jesus, hearing and obeying his words, and doing what he did, even laying down one's life as Jesus laid down his. Faith, trust, faithful discipleship is what makes it possible for us to interpret the signs correctly.

With the clarity of hindsight, we now look back to that day in December of 1955, when a black woman named Rosa Parks got on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and dared to sit in the seats reserved for Whites only, as the heroic beginning of the struggle by African Americans for civil rights. But few people on that day saw her action as a sign of anything but either stupidity or uppityness. Even Rosa Parks herself, by her own account, when she went to work that morning, had no thought that by the time she got home that evening, she would have begun a revolution that would shake this country to its roots. She was, she says, "just tired"—tired from standing on her feet all day and tired of being treated like a sub-human.

But a young black minister in

Montgomery, not long out of school, newly married, and newly called to the pulpit of a church in Montgomery, saw the action of Rosa Parks as a sign. It was certainly not an unambiguous sign. The authorities of Montgomery saw it as a sign too, but they read it as the sign of a threat to the very stability of civilized society as they defined it. They read it as a sign of a threat to their God-given right to exercise political control and dominance over black people, who were obviously inferior. To others on the bus that day, it may have been a sign of stupidity or insolence or foolishness.

To Martin Luther King, Jr., however, it was a sign where the glory of God was being revealed. It was a sign of God's imminent call to action on behalf of the liberation of a whole people and the transformation of an unjust society. It was King's faith that enabled him to see in the action of a brave and fed-up and tired woman, the sign of God's action in history to liberate and transform peoples and nations.

So on the strength of that sign, Martin Luther King, Jr. believed, in the same sense that Jesus' disciples believed at the wedding in Cana—he followed. His faithful following led him to organize a boycott of the buses in Montgomery, and the rest is history. He began a work of enormous social transformation that began to liberate, not only African Americans, but white Americans as well. That transformation is far from complete. The specter of racism still haunts, not only America, but France, and Germany and India—the whole world in fact, and the resurgence of ethnic rivalries and competition makes us realize that Brother Martin's work is not finished yet. But it is work well-begun, and we who remember that work can never forget that because of it, we too have seen a glimpse of the glory of God. For who can doubt that in the lives of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and in the lives of all those who have followed them in struggling to make the structures of society more just, God has been present and at work. But it

took a tired and courageous woman, and a young man of extraordinary faith and a willingness to follow wherever that faith led him to read the sign, to understand that God was there, that God was working, that God was calling him and millions of others to work too.

God is calling us too to enter into God's own work of liberating people. The signs are not easy to spot, and when we do spot them, they're not easy to read, but they are there. Signs of glory. Wherever and whenever reconciliation between individuals or peoples takes place, God's glory is seen. Wherever and whenever an unjust law or an unjust practice gives way to justice, God's glory shines through. Whenever or wherever individuals or peoples are freed from what enslaves them, be it personal bondage or society's oppression, a sign is pointing to the glory of God. Only eyes focused by faith and vision sharpened by committed discipleship can read the signs truly.

That's our calling, to read and follow the signs of God's saving work in the world. And since God is at work "out there," our gaze has to be turned outward beyond our own fellowship, beyond meeting our own needs, beyond tending to our organizational structures, repairing our building, working in our committees. We are here both to be a sign to others that God is present and redeeming the world, and also to read those signs of God's presence around us that call us to join in, to put our shoulders to the wheel, to work for peace and justice and liberation wherever we see the opportunities. That will make all the difference, not only for our own lives, but for the life of this community and indeed, the life of the world.