

Reading the signs can either save you or sink you. The sign says your highway exit is coming up. Signs are telling you not to skip that appointment with your doctor. We rely a lot on signs, for good reason. But signs that don't help us or confuse us even more keep us from going where we need to go, and we could find ourselves in a lot of trouble.

God's work among us is shown in signs. His signs are given for the comfort and the personal assurance of all those who believe in Him. Yet for those who are evildoers, faithless and opposed to God, His signs are signs of wrath and condemnation. They know who they are because they are without excuse; their father the devil stands condemned by the decree of Almighty God, as seen already in Genesis chapter three, where the offended Creator says to the serpent: I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed. He shall crush thy head, and thou shalt crush His heel. To us, this statement means victory, relief from oppression, that Christ the Seed of the woman shall conquer over sin, death and the devil. But to the prince of darkness it means destruction, and he will not stand for that.

Thus it is with King Ahaz, in our reading from the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament. This man, though he was a King of Judah and a descendant of the faithful King David, Ahaz is still just a political opportunist who is hearing this prophecy from God. Does he hear a voice from heaven, or from somewhere within himself?

No, Ahaz hears God's word speaking from the mouth of Isaiah, God's chosen preacher.

With utmost patience, God is offering yet again to give a sign to this wicked king for the sake of the believers in his kingdom, as well as his righteous father, David. All of creation, from the highest heights to the lowest depths is in the control of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It was his idea to reach out to Ahaz! Any sign would have been possible to give lasting comfort and peace to young Ahaz. This was his first year as king, and already he was caught up in a war with two northern nemeses: namely Syria, and the broken off tribes of Israel. He could have used a divine sign for comfort, but instead Ahaz chose to discard the sign and he mocked Almighty God in rash unbelief. What good can a sign do for you if you refuse to believe what it says? The king even had the nerve to tell God that He was off-base! There's ironic snark in his response: "Far be it from me to test God, I will not ask!"

You see, Ahaz was not suddenly going to be a pious and reverent man. He only had one thing on his mind and that was to secure and solidify his political power. Nothing got in the way of his ambition—not even his family, many of whom were killed at his orders for the sake of personal convenience.

You could say that King Ahaz and King Herod, who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth, have many things in common. Although Herod was basically a puppet king of the Roman Empire, he still went to great lengths to keep what power he had. He, too, would

kill his own family, or even murder every innocent two-year-old in Bethlehem to keep sitting on his throne. So, for Ahaz, Isaiah's prophecy of the Virgin's Son, Immanuel, was not a comfort but a judgment from God against him. He heard the verdict on behalf of the whole family line of kings descended from David. Desolation would soon come to the people of Judah and Ahaz would be judged. Because he lacked faith in God, Ahaz failed to read the Sign. The Sign. The promised Messiah was not going to be yet another political king, but "...of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end."

As it was with Ahaz, it was the same for Herod. When Isaiah's prophetic words about Immanuel were fulfilled, when Joseph took Mary to be his wife and the baby boy Jesus was born of His Virgin Mother and laid in the manger, King Herod trembled for his feeble, earthly throne. Both kings, Ahaz and Herod, received this blessed Gospel word with fear and trembling—they would be ever hearing, but never perceiving, just like the Pharisees who heard Jesus, but refused to take His parables to heart. Even then, Ahaz has this one distinct difference from Herod—he was the ancestor of the very Messiah that he rejected! So the sign did not bring good news to him.

However, to repentant sinners, to you and to me, God's work through signs, through this sign of Immanuel, Jesus, God with Us, the baby in the manger means great comfort. This season of Advent we have responded to the urgent call of John the Baptist, telling us to repent and take our sins as the serious barriers to God's love that they are. We looked forward through that repentance to the coming joy that we were able to mark and celebrate last week. Now the Lord gives

comfort to our repent hearts. And comfort not just for us today looking back at Christmas as just a past event, but this is comfort for people of all times, for this time, for what you and I have to face in this evil world every day. All the faithful people since Adam and Eve who looked for the Messiah to crush the serpent's head and save us from our sins—this sign says He is now right here! God wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, the one Truth who came into our human flesh, wrapped up in swaddling clothes and was laid in a manger on the night He was born. This Immanuel, He is God's Gospel-sign for us today and always. Jesus Christ is true God, the Son of the Father, who came down from heaven to be God-with-us, to be one of us.

When God gives signs, He also hides Himself in those signs. Why does God have to hide Himself? Because no sinful human being may see God the Holy One and live. We would be condemned and lost forever if we were to approach God's presence unforgiven. That was the reason why Adam and Eve had to be banished from the garden. Their punishment for their sin would have been permanent if they had remained in God's holy, unveiled presence. Our sins merit that same exact punishment—God is not accessible to us because we are unholy.

But an amazing thing happens when God hides Himself. When God hides Himself, He is actually making Himself accessible to us! God the Father reveals that He is Our Father because He is the Father of Jesus Christ, who came from Heaven to be one of us. Christmas, then, embraces and celebrates the gift that God the Father gave for the life of the world: He gave Immanuel, God the

Eternal Son Himself is here with us, hidden and lowly.

Immanuel is more than just a fancy name. It's a phrase—God with us. The name reveals the two natures of Christ, He is true God and He is true man: God with us. It's the whole theme of Christmas and even of our whole life in communion with God as the holy Christian Church. Jesus is God in human flesh, which we say in the creed as Incarnate. The Father's purpose for sending His Son to live and ultimately to die in our human flesh was “for us and for our salvation.” God incarnate, though, wasn't just a one-time historical event; our reason for celebration this December 25th is not only that Jesus is one year older this year. That may be true, since He still has a real human nature, but more importantly, Christmas tells us how we come to know God, and especially how we come to know that God actually loves us, that He chose to reveal Himself to us. In the flesh of Jesus Christ, this is God who came to us, and that's why He gave us this sign.

Coming in the flesh wasn't all He did. Immanuel is hidden also in another sign, a suffering man on the cross, a spectacle of foolishness, a stumbling block that unbelievers refuse to accept. Our own sinful natures inside us, they tempt us to ignore Him, to prefer other ways to have contact with God. Still, God comes back to us with His signs. He won't give up on us. He won't give up on you. He is ever patient, never wanting the sinner to die but to repent, say I am a sinner, and receive His absolution.

The forgiveness of our sins was won when Jesus died on the cross, and eternal life was proclaimed when Christ rose from the dead. That very same forgiveness and life is given

here in the Divine Service, and here God gives more signs. He hides himself in the signs we have as our treasures here under this roof. His Holy Word that you read in the Bible and hear in the sermon, Baptism and Holy Communion—these are God's signs and He reveals Himself to us in them just as at the same time He hides Himself in them. We who once belonged to the devil and were worthy of nothing from God except condemnation, have by God's own signs been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Whatever our hardship that we may face, He gives us the grace in the forgiveness and life that we receive here to endure that hardship because now, with these signs, He lives in us—Immanuel, God with us!

Jesus Christ, Son of the Father, Son of the Virgin, this Jesus is revealed in the flesh in order to forgive you, and that forgiveness is what the Church gladly proclaims until Jesus returns in glory at the end of the world. We sing His praises as we join in the song that the angels sang to the shepherds in their fields: Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, good will toward men. We pray with all believers for Our Lord Jesus to do as we prayed in the Collect of the Day today: “Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come among us.” And He does it! And He will do it again, as we look forward with the whole Church to that Day when God will no longer hide Himself in signs but then we as His forgiven people, will meet Him face-to-face. Thanks be to God that He has given us all of His signs to save us. This Christmas, the risen Immanuel invites you to behold God's great Sign. Receive forgiveness through the signs He has instituted to deliver that forgiveness to you. Bring your hopes and fears of all the years. They will be met in the

baby boy of Bethlehem, the Incarnate Son of  
God our Immanuel.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.