

“HOW DO YOU READ THE SIGNS?”

A sermon proclaimed at St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia
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Dear members and welcome guests of St. John's:

How would we ever survive without signs? There are traffic signs, directional signs, advertisement signs, signs that prohibit certain activities or wearing apparel, so many signs that the landscape becomes cluttered and it will get worse as election time gets closer, I assure you.

Signs are helpful so long as you understand them. One of our dear friends, newly arrived in Germany and knowing no German, had to use the bathroom. She was confused because their door signs were different. One had a “D” on it and the other an “H”; she pondered that for a moment and decided the “H” must stand for “hers” and walked right into the men's bathroom. In German, the “H” stands for “*Herren*” or men and the “D” for “*Damen*” or women. We tell that story and laugh about it every time we get together

There are other kinds of significant unposted, silent signs as well like when you suddenly become aware that your spouse isn't speaking to you. Has that ever happened to you? You don't want to ignore that sign. Or a persistent pain in your body that continues to intensify. The gradual shortening of daylight hours is a silent sign of change in the seasons. In today's Gospel Jesus refers to various familiar metrological signs which indicate change in the weather.

However, in the appointed scripture lessons we learn of a different but even more important sign. They present a contrast between those who can read these special signs and those who cannot or choose to ignore them. This results in opposing views of reality which, inevitably and unfortunately, cause division which often leads to strife. One view looks through the three-D glasses of faith and faithfulness to God and patterns their lives and posits their hopes in God. The other looks through the rose colored glasses of faithlessness to God and patterns their lives and plans in self. The view which one holds or the belief system one espouses depend on how one reads the signs. Let's look into what that means today as each of us asks ourselves, “How do I read the signs?”

Jeremiah, in our first lesson certainly read the signs differently. His world was vastly different from our own and yet there are striking similarities. The once proud nation of Kings David and Solomon consisting of the twelve tribes of Israel had shrunk geographically into two small tribes now called Judea and it lost its prestige in the world. To shore up their defenses, they made alliances with their immediate neighboring nations. They felt rather secure, secure enough to predict it was God's sign that there would be perpetual peace and safety and prosperity would continue. And, just to make sure they had all their bases covered, they added a few foreign gods whom some also worshipped in return for their protection.

“Not so!!” declares sign reader Jeremiah. These leaders “*fill you with false hopes. They keep saying to those who despise me, ‘The LORD says: You will have peace.’ And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’*” That's pure fantasy. More troops and stronger treaties may be well and good. But, Jeremiah says, that misses the important sign. Your faith and trust is totally misplaced if it does not find its reason for being and purpose in committed faithfulness to the one and only universal God whose counsel, will, and way of life many of you now reject. If you can't read that sign, you're doom is inevitable! And so it was. Within Jeremiah's lifetime, their country was overrun, most of its people killed, and others hauled away into forced servitude by a new far away master.

Fast forward a few centuries to the world of Jesus in today's Gospel. Another new far away master ruled their land with an iron hand. People had to walk around on eggshells trying to be politically correct so as to maintain the fragile status quo. If peace is described as the absence of war, there was peace. But beneath the surface there seethed a boiling cauldron of division, resistance, and intensifying desperation for a sign, someone to throw off the oppressive shackles and bring peace. Many thought that Jesus just might be that someone.

Jesus strongly rejects that political role. Instead he declares, "*I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!*" referring to the sign of his God directed, upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. The result of his atoning death was to offer once again to all of fallen creation a restored covenant relationship with God. For his part, he signed this covenant with his own blood and now extends that contract to all who recognize his sign and co-sign with their pledge of faith and faithfulness to God, regardless of the opposition or division encountered because of it.

In that cloud of witnesses our second lesson from Hebrews enumerates the scores of biblical members of faith's "Hall of Fame" and the struggle each endured to remain faithful to their redeeming God whose promise was not realized during their lifetime, but whose end reward was assured. "*These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*" Did you catch that? God has planed something better for us who remain faithful. With the sign of the cross behind us and the crown before us we struggle on through the many perplexities of life and the divisions of this world until we take our victory lap in the heavenly Olympic arena to the cheers of those witnesses waiting in the stands.

As we wait that day, in addition to maintaining our faith in Jesus Christ and doing God's will, we can also use the example of our words and lives to help heal the divisions and become a sign to those who continue to disbelieve.

I close with the example of the Whirling Dervishes. Probably many of you have never seen them but it is truly a spectacular performance. With their enormous bee hive hats and white flowing cassocks each quartet whirls around to music in synchronized fashion so many times it would make even a figure skater ill. What isn't apparent is that, for them, this is a religious experience. By meditation they are able to put themselves into a trance which enables them to continue to twirl. What is significant and my point here is the stance of the Dervishes. Their arms are extended with the right arm a little higher than the left and the right hand is extended upward to receive the gifts that God gives and their left hand is extended downward signifying that they become a conduit through whom Gods gifts are gotten and the world to whom God's gifts are given. On this lucky thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost may each of us be such a conduit, such a sign to do whatever we can so that faith will prevail and eventually give us peace. Amen