

“Signs Along the Way” – Isaiah 9:6

I suppose I should start the sermon today by wishing you all a 'Happy New Year.' But before you think that I've completely lost it, let me explain. Today is the beginning of a new year – not that we've fast forwarded to Jan 1; It's not Chinese New Year or anything like that. Today is the 1st Sunday in Advent, the beginning of a new Church year.

I do sometimes think that we neglect Advent a bit. Often times we launch right into Christmas talk when Advent begins. But, Advent isn't Christmas, and neither is Advent about preparing for Christmas the holiday. Advent is a time of waiting, a time of preparation for celebrating the coming of God into the world in human form in the person of Jesus his Son. It's also a time to remember that Jesus will come again, and it's important to prepare our hearts and lives for His second coming.

It's interesting that the Church year doesn't start on some great high point, or with some fervent celebration, not with fireworks, not even with the birth of Jesus or with his resurrection – but with a period of waiting and preparation, with a sense of emptiness and wondering. But I think it's good because if we don't go through this season of Advent waiting and watching and preparing, then we don't really have anything to celebrate.

So, during this season of waiting and preparation, we will look at some signs of Jesus' first and second coming. To begin, how many of you think we need more road signs or billboards? They're everywhere. They can be annoying. They can be distracting. They cover up other things around them. Some refer to them as “eye pollution.” They can also exclude or limit. There was a song written and performed by the Five Man Electrical Band entitled “Signs.” “Sign, sign, everywhere a sign, blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind; do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?”

But, signs can also be helpful, for sure. They can give direction, and tell you what lies ahead. There are also signs that indicate what time of year it is – green grass, colored leaves, and snow. Salvation Army bell ringers, flashing and festive lights on trees and homes, and Christmas music on our radios and in the stores, are all signs that Christmas is coming.

In our church during this time of year there are signs as well – signs of Advent, signs of preparation, anticipation and the coming celebration. Greenery, poinsettia plants, trees, lights, and blue paraments. An important sign during the Advent season are the Advent candles. We lit the first one this week and, in the coming Sundays up until Christmas we light an additional one until, on Christmas Eve & Day we light the white candle in the middle representing Christ, the Light of the World. As the candles are lit each week so the waiting progresses and the expectation grows.

And the most important signs for us, of course, are the signs given us in Scripture of Christ's birth and of His return. Listen to the sign given by the prophet Isaiah in our first reading today: “For to us a child will be born, to us a son is given...and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” That sign was delivered over 700 years before Jesus was born!

And what a sign it was! God was saying through Isaiah, “I have good news for you... I will send my son to save you.” “For a child will be born. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

God's promise came true just over 2000 years ago. God sent his angel to reassure Joseph: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to (my promised son) and you will give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins."

This is the good news to which the signs of Advent, the signs of Christmas are pointing. This is not good news that allows you to make 3 easy payments for that special Christmas gift. The good news for us in this special time of year is that the payment for your forgiveness and salvation has already been made. "For God placed all our sins, all the commandments we have broken on the cross of Jesus and left them there." The signs along the way are visible and powerful, and life-changing.

So Advent is an invitation to wait and wonder, to watch and ponder as the truth about the incarnation (God coming to earth) is unveiled. As we journey through Advent the picture of this Jesus becomes clearer. He is no ordinary baby, despite the surroundings of his birth.

This Jesus we wait for is the one who will come again to redeem the world and bring in the new heaven and the new earth at some time in the future, a time unknown to us. We wait and watch and live our lives each day for him.

This Jesus is the one who was promised from ages ago and to whom John the Baptist points and where his identity is confirmed in his actions – healing and loving, caring and sharing. And this Jesus we wait for is a king born in a stable, God himself come to earth for us.

Some ways for you and your family to celebrate Advent in your home:

Read Advent devotions as a family – Lifeway.com – download Advent guide for your family.

Make a prayer garland – 24 strips of construction paper – names of family, friends, ministries.

Advent Calendar

Use Christmas cards as prayer reminders – pull out a card each day and pray for person/family.

Advent wreath – buy or make simple one with candles.

The candles, the advent calendars, even the trees and lights, all invite us to wait, to wonder, to look for Christ. He was born in an obscure stable in Bethlehem. He will come again with great glory when this world ends. He is now hidden but can be found by those who wait and watch and wonder. May we wait in expectation and find Jesus this Christmas. Amen.