

A Sign for You

In the name of Son given to us who is called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, dear friends in Christ: “This will be a sign for you” the angel told the shepherds, “you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” Such a sign sounds pretty specific to our ears; but consider: every newborn infant in Judea would have been wrapped in swaddling cloths. It’s like saying the baby will be wearing a diaper. What else would you expect? And these were shepherds. They lived very close to the animals they cared for. They also raised their own children. You can’t tell me that in the course of their lives they’d never seen a baby placed in a manger. If you’re out working with the livestock and you’ve got to put the baby down, what else are you going to do? Lay the poor child in the muck on the stable floor? I don’t think so. Such a sight would not have been that unusual to them. And yet these are the two signs God gave them by which they were to identify the infant Lord Jesus. Something more is going on here.

Granted, in the relatively small town of Bethlehem on that particular night, there was probably only one infant attired in the first century version of Pampers lying in a manger. Still, the signs given in Holy Scripture do more than tell you what you’re looking at and might have missed otherwise. They point to things more significant. They reveal hidden spiritual truths. And as it turns out, Luke’s account of the birth of our Lord is full of such signs. I thought it would be good for us to look at some of them and understand what they’re telling us.

At the very beginning of the text there is the sign of the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. He was at that time the most powerful man who had ever lived on the face of the earth. His empire extended from the British Isles in the north to Egypt in the south, and from Spain in the west to Babylon in the east. No one had ever before ruled over such a vast domain or as many subjects. And hey, you know you have to be pretty important to have a month of the year named after you. No doubt a man like that feels that he’s in charge. No one tells him what to do. And he wants to know the precise number of the people he rules over. So he orders a census be taken: a huge undertaking and a logistical and accounting nightmare. But he’s got the power to do it. “/ have spoken. Let it be done!” He thinks he’s in charge. But no. We find instead that though he does not know it or even acknowledge the One True God, he is the Lord’s servant to move the Holy Family from Nazareth of Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea so that the words of the prophets concerning the birthplace of the Savior might be fulfilled. Caesar Augustus is not in command; the Lord God is.

Next we have the sign of Bethlehem, the city of David, where that first unlikely shepherd king was born and raised. It’s fitting that the Good Shepherd King Descendant who will sit on the throne of his father David forever should be born in the same place. Even more fitting is that the name Bethlehem means “House of Bread”. And bread, as you know, was the staple food of ancient Israel. It’s what people lived on. It was so essential to life that the Hebrew word for bread, lechem, actually means “for life”. But then Scripture teaches that man does not live on bread, but rather on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. And now, when the Word of God made flesh makes his first appearance, he does so in the House of Bread – or if you prefer, the House of For Life. As Jesus would later say, “I am the Bread of Life come from heaven ... If anyone eats of this Bread, he will live forever ... [This] Bread is my flesh that I will give for the life of the world.”

Following that significant sign, we have the sign of the shepherds. Such shepherds would have rated pretty low on the social scale back then. It was dirty, sometimes dangerous work that involved long hours and low pay. Mostly it was performed by hired hands who watched over sheep that belonged to others. Polite society considered them coarse, crude, ignorant, and undesirable. And yet it was to such men as these that the Lord first sent the message that the Savior of the world had been born. There's a message there. But these weren't just any shepherds. These were Bethlehem shepherds. And Bethlehem is only five miles or so from Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem was the Temple of the Lord that required a steady supply of lambs for sacrifice – sacrifices by which the Lord forgave the sins of his people. Most of those lambs were raised and watched over by Bethlehem shepherds. To be sure, they were likely in the field that night precisely because it was lambing season. They were watching over the births of lambs destined for sacrifice. So it's fitting indeed that they should be called away from that task briefly to watch over the newborn Lamb of God who by his sacrifice would take away the sins of the world.

What called them away was the sign of angels from heaven. You know when angels appear, something major is going on. At first, it's just one angel shining forth with the bright glory of the Lord. The shepherds were terrified. They had never seen anything so frightening. They felt the judgment of God had come upon them. But the comforting words of the angel did not match his fearsome appearance. No, he had good news of great joy for all people. And then the entire sky exploded with light as multitudes of angels in heavenly chorus appeared giving glory to God and proclaiming his peace to the earth. No one on earth had ever before seen the likes of that most glorious sign.

Which is why it needs to be contrasted with the sign of the Holy Family's humility. Put yourself in the shepherds' sandals. You've just witnessed a sight unbelievably spectacular. You've been told that the most wonderful thing in the world has occurred. You go to see it, expecting ... I don't know ... something even more spectacular I should guess. But when you get there, all you can make out through the darkness is a poor, temporarily homeless couple and their newborn baby taking shelter with the livestock. It's like not what you see on the Christmas cards with halos on Mary and Joseph and light emanating from the infant Jesus as at his transfiguration, and angels with banners and trumpets hovering over all. No, it's not like that at all. The scene appears rather pathetic. It's a sight that evokes pity, not wonder. But it's a sign of what this child's appearing is all about. He comes not in heavenly or ever earthly glory, not in terror as the king of kings; but meek, needy, humble. He comes not to rule but to serve.

How he will serve is given by the sign of the swaddling cloths. By themselves (as pointed out earlier) they are not that remarkable. It's what people put on their babies back then: strips of linen torn from old, worn out garments. In an age when all cloth was handmade and quite expensive, you made every use you could of it. And no one would have wasted new cloth to do the dirty job of covering their baby's little bottom. So, how is this a sign of how Jesus will serve? It's this: St. Luke tells us of one other time that the body of Jesus is wrapped in strips of linen. It's when he's being buried. The two wrappings in strips of linen act as book ends to the life and ministry of Jesus. Both times he is utterly helpless. He's being handled by others who place him first in the manger and later in the tomb. The sign of the swaddling cloths tell us that Jesus has come to serve us by his death.

How he will die in service to us is revealed by the sign of the manger: the body of Jesus set upon a wooden structure, suspended by it above the filth of the stable floor. It points to his being lifted up on a wooden cross where he will suffer and die for the filthy sins of all mankind.

More than that, a manger is for feeding sheep. It's where you put the food the sheep eat. The sign of the manger tells us that the crucified body of Jesus is food for his sheep.

"This will be a sign for you" the angel told the shepherds. They are signs for us too. And very shortly we will see yet another sign – the sign he's given to his Church until he comes again in glory: the sign of his Supper by which Jesus, the Word of God made man and born of the Virgin Mary gives you the very Bread of Life from heaven, his own flesh and blood under bread and wine. They are given to you as a sign and seal of his perfect life as a man, his death as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and his resurrection to endless life as the firstfruits of the new creation.

May we with the Virgin mother treasure these things and ponder them in our hearts. And with the shepherds, may we glorify and praise God for all we have seen and heard that has been made known to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!