

“Signs!”

A Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Epiphany

Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton
First United Presbyterian Church
Bellefontaine, Ohio

January 23, 2011

Now, the Season of Epiphany, of course, is the season of the church year when we remember the breaking in of God’s reality into the world around us...especially in the person and work of Jesus, the Christ...the one we call Emmanuel...God WITH us. And yet, some folks these days have a difficult time SEEING God’s presence and say that the signs of God’s reality are few and far between. Some claim that God doesn’t do miracles any more....that Gods doesn’t SHOW God’s self as God did in the days of old. Some folks even think God has quit giving us SIGNS altogether. But I’m not so sure that’s true.

Perhaps you will remember the Golden Oldie song from the late 60’s or early 70’s that used to play on the radio a lot...and still does on the “oldies” stations. It’s called *Signs* and was sung by the Five Man Electric Band. The chorus of it went like this:

*Signs, signs, everywhere are signs,
Blocking out the scenery, breaking my mind,
Do this! Don’t do that! Can’t you read the signs!*

To be sure, the signs of God’s presence are everywhere. We just don’t always know how to read them. And often times, we miss the biggest sign of all: the one that looks back at us when we stare at our reflection in the mirror.

Our scripture readings this morning come to us from three places within the New Testament and two from the Old...and they all have to do with SIGNS. I invite you to listen to the Word of God.

Isaiah 60:1-3
Matthew 16:1-4
Mark 8:11-13
John 20:30-31
Judges 6:1-24

Leader: Friends, rejoice and give thanks, for this is the Word of the Lord!

People: Thanks be to God!

Call to Prayer: “*Spirit of the Living God*”

A Prayer for Guidance

Show us the signs of your presence all around us Holy God!

Help us to see you at work in our world.

Help us to feel your holy presence in our lives.

Help us to know you are Emmanuel...

here...with us...in the midst of us...

O Holy One who is as close to us as the air we breathe...

as close to us as the person right beside us...

as close to us as the reflection we see in mirror.

Show us the signs, Lord, and help us see!

For we ask it in Christ name, Amen!

Now, like us today, the people in Jesus’ time wanted to see the SIGNS of God’s presence in their midst...or to be more specific...to see the signs of God’s presence in JESUS. In other words, they often wanted him to do MIRACLES in order to PROVE that he had God’s blessing...to PROVE that he was who he said he was...to PROVE that the power of God Almighty not only rested UPON him...but also WITHIN him. But Jesus always refused...at least he refused in the Synoptic Gospels

– Matthew, Mark, and Luke...primarily because Jesus didn't want people believing in him JUST because he could do miracles...JUST because he could show them a SIGN. JOHN'S gospel on the other hand is FULL of signs...MIRACLES, John called them...all of which John recorded PRECISELY so that people WOULD believe in Jesus...so that by believing in him, they may have life. All of which, it seems to me, becomes quite CONFUSING when we're trying to understand this whole SIGN business...and how those signs are supposed to PROVE God's presence in our midst.

Well, in order to understand it all a little better, I want to turn our attention AWAY from Jesus for a moment and take a look back at an Old Testament character named GIDEON.

Now, to be honest about it, the only thing that MOST of us know about GIDEON is that he's got a lot of friends who like to put Bibles in hotel rooms all over the world. Oh, for some of us, there's this vague memory of him blowing on a trumpet and scaring the bejeebes out of Israel's enemies. But in all honesty, that's about it. Or rather that was about it for ME...until, that is, I recently re-read Gideon's story from the book of Judges.

It's a story from Israel's ancient past – before the temple in Jerusalem...before King David in all his grandeur...before Israel even had any kings at all. Gideon was one of Israel's JUDGES...like Deborah and Samson...charismatic leaders who, by the spirit of God, defended Israel from her enemies and inspired the people with their heroic deeds.

But Gideon was no hero, at least not at first. Like all the other judges in Israel's history, his abilities came not from within himself, but from God. And it took the visit of an angel and a sign from the Lord to get him going. Even then, however, the angel had to do some mighty powerful convincing to get Gideon on board with God's plan. But that's what I LIKE about Gideon – his undisguised *queasiness* about answering God's call...sort of like Moses...and Jeremiah...and Jonah...and ME. He wasn't brave. He didn't step right up and VOLUNTEER for the assignment. He didn't say, "*Here I am, Lord! Send ME!*" Instead, he kept coming up with reason why he COULDN'T do what God was asking him to do. And he wouldn't budge without a SIGN...without a display of divine fireworks to PROVE that the angel really was sent from God.

The story of his call begins in a wine press where he was hiding out from the Midianites, who were Israel's enemies of the day. The press was a big vat carved out of a rock in the ground, big enough for several people to tromp grapes in...and big enough, in this case, to thresh wheat. Gideon was down there because every time the Midianites saw something of value, they galloped in on their camels and took it. They were a powerful nomadic tribe who had plagued Israel for years. They let the Israelites do all the work...harvesting the grapes or the wheat or the barley or the olives. And then, when all the work was done and everything was all neatly piled up in baskets, they would swoop in and take it all...killing any of the Israelites who dared to get in the way or try and stop them.

Well, after seven years of such torment and suffering, the people were all crying out for relief. So God finally said enough was enough and sent an angel to show Gideon a way out of it all. Only the initial interview didn't go so well. "*The Lord is with you, you brave and mighty man,*" the angel said to Gideon, who, it became readily apparent, was in no mood for either flattery OR religious talk about the Lord. "*Well if the Lord IS with us,*" Gideon bluntly replied, "*then why in the sam-hill is all this happening to us?*"

It was as if the angel had simply said, "*Good Morning, Gideon!*" and Gideon had replied, "*Yeah RIGHT! What's so GOOD about it?*" By his definition...which, I imagine is pretty similar to OUR definitions...the way you know the Lord is WITH you is that everything is going well: no trouble...no sickness...no marauding band of Midianites breathing down your neck. Gideon wanted the God he had heard miracle stories about...the God who did wonderful deeds like parting the Red Sea and providing manna from heaven and water from the rock and bringing Israel up out of Egypt-land and into a land flowing with milk and honey...NOT this God who simply stood by for seven years while his SUPPOSEDLY chosen people were robbed and killed.

Well, immediately the angel simply agreed that it was time to put a stop to all the trouble Israel was experiencing. So right then and there, he commissioned Gideon to take care of it all. "*YOU go do it, Gideon!*" the angel said to him. "*YOU go with all of your great strength and rescue Israel from the Midianites!*" Which was NOT...I repeat...**NOT** what Gideon had in mind.

“But...but...but,” Gideon sputtered. “How can I do it? I’m weak. I’m small. I’m least. There must be dozens...HUNDREDS...of others who are better qualified than I am. I didn’t volunteer. Honestly...HONESTLY...I’m NOT your man.

“But I will be WITH you,” the Lord replied. Which says to me that Gideon’s own self-perceived lack of qualifications didn’t really matter much. All that mattered was his partnership with God...who doesn’t call ANYONE to do ANYTHING without also promising to go WITH them!

Still, Gideon wanted to make sure it was really God he was dealing with and not just a bad case of indigestion talking to him. So he said, *“Show me a SIGN. I’ve got to have a SIGN if I’m going to believe. Show me a SIGN that you really are who you say to are. Show me a SIGN that it’s really God who is calling me.”*

Now, if Gideon had been a New Testament character instead of an Old, he might have gotten himself into some hot water for asking such a thing. In the NEW Testament...at least in those first three Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – the only reason you would ever ask for a SIGN was because you didn’t have FAITH...because you wanted Jesus to PROVE something...because you needed a SIGN in order to BELIEVE. In John’s Gospel, as we said earlier, it’s different. John’s Gospel has this whole SERIES of signs...SEVEN of them in all...ALL of which are there PRECISELY to prove that Jesus most definitely IS the Son of God...so that by BELIEVING that Jesus is the Son of God, the reader might have LIFE. The difference for JOHN, you see, is that the people never ASK for signs. Jesus just DOES them...precisely IN ORDER to PROVE who he is.

In the OLD Testament, however...the HEBREW scripture...it was perfectly acceptable to ASK for a sign. It was even considered a GOOD IDEA – a way to “test the spirits,” so to speak, in order to make sure that what was calling you didn’t come from the dark side of the moon OR from your own imagination. So Gideon did what ANYONE in his position would have done. He asked for a SIGN. And he himself even designed the sign. Telling the angel to sit tight, he ran in the house to prepare a meal.

Now, what comes next, of course, is so strange that there’s no reason why ANY of us should understand it. But what Gideon wants to know was how the angel will consume the meal. If his visitor simply gobbles down the goat, sops up the gravy with his bread, wipes his lips on the back of his hand and burps (which, by the way, was a sign in Middle Eastern culture of how much you enjoyed the meal), then Gideon would KNOW that he has a fake on his hands...that it’s not really God who is talking to him. But, if the meal bursts into flames and is consumed by fire, then he will know it truly IS God. Don’t ask me WHY it has to happen that way. That’s just the way people believe God proved God’s self in those days.

So when Gideon comes out of the house with all the food the angel tells him to put it all on a rock and to pour the pot of broth over top of it. Then with the touch of his stick, the rock suddenly bursts into flame, consumes the meal and the angel vanishes from Gideon’s sight. After which Gideon could only stare with his mouth hanging open, knowing that he had been in the presence of the Lord! *“Lord, HELP me!”* he cried out in fear for his life. *“I’ve just seen an angel of the Lord face to face!”*

But the Lord said to him, *“Don’t be afraid, Gideon! You shall not die! Peace be with you!”* So Gideon built an altar there and called the place *The Peace of the Lord.*

Now, you’ll have to read the book of Judges to find out the rest of this wonderful and fascinating story. Just suffice it to say that with Gideon on the warpath and God by his side, things don’t go so well for the Medianites from that point on.

What I want us to think about this morning, however, is not so much what happened to the Medianites, but to the important LESSON this story of Gideon offers to us all. Because the real BEAUTY of the story...for ME, anyway...is in this whole business about SIGNS. Gideon wanted a SIGN in order to believe God was actually going to DO something about the Medianites. Well God GAVE Gideon what he asked for. And Gideon HIMSELF was it! Gideon HIMSELF became the sign he asked to see! It wasn’t just the meal that burned up on the rock. That was just done so that Gideon could know for sure that it really was God who was talking to him. No, what Gideon REALLY wanted...the REAL SIGN Gideon wanted to see...was that God cared enough about his people to put an end to their suffering and torment...an end to all the robbing and the killing the Israelites were going through at the hands of the Medianites. And that was PRECISELY what God

gave Gideon by calling GIDEON HIMSELF to be God's SIGN...to be the PROOF that God loved and cared enough about the plight of the Israelites to actually DO something about it. By answering God's call, Gideon BECOMES God's sign.

Which is, to be sure, a powerful message for us today when WE TOO...even in our OWN day and age...long for a SIGN that God is indeed WITH us...that God CARES about us...that God LOVES us. Even in our OWN day and age, WE TOO get tired of having to "hide out," so to speak, from the "Medianites" that plague our lives...from whatever it is that torments our living. WE TOO long for God's wonderful deeds and sometimes want to ask for God to PROVE God's self by doing something SPECTACULAR .

Come on, God! Step in and DO something about all the hunger in the world...about all the natural disasters...about the pain and suffering so many people have to go through!

Come on, God! Prove you CARE about people who are sick and suffering with incurable diseases...about people who are outcast and lonely and alone in the world...about people who've lost loved ones and are experiencing tragedy in their lives.

Show us you really ARE the God of peace and put an end to all the divisions and misunderstandings in the world...not just in the Middle East or in Africa or China or Korea...but right here, AT HOME, as well...right here in BELLEFONTAINE...among people who can't seem to get along...among people from different churches...among people within the THIS church. Bring that PEACE ON EARTH your Bible is always talking about God. PROVE it to us. Show us the SIGNS that you that you really are REAL and that you really do CARE about us. BOTTOM LINE it for us God! Show us the SIGNS!

But I think we might ought to be CAREFUL what we ask for. Because there is every chance in the world that God will say to US...just as God said to Gideon, "Okay! Sounds Great! YOU be the sign!"

"But...but...but..." we stammer and stutter. "I'm too YOUNG...I'm too OLD...I'm too INSIGNIFICANT...I'm a NOBODY...Find somebody ELSE...I don't QUALIFY...I don't have the SKILLS...I'm too NEW...I've been around too LONG...It's somebody ELSE'S turn...I'm NOT your man...I'm not your WOMAN...I didn't VOLUNTEER...Honestly, you need to find someone ELSE God!" At least that's what GIDEON said! And I don't imagine OUR reactions would be...WILL be...all that much different from Gideon's. But, in reality, it doesn't ultimately matter WHAT excuses we might offer. Because, ultimately, our self-perceived disqualifications are not important. We asked for a SIGN...and God GAVE us a sign...US! PERIOD!

Besides, God has a "but" to offer, as well. "But I will be WITH you," God says. And that, you see, is ALL that really matters. "And his name shall be called EMMANUEL...which means, God WITH us." "And lo, I am WITH YOU, ALWAYS, even to the close of the age."

Jesus wouldn't give his critics a sign because he HIMSELF was the sign. And as his followers, WE TOO are the SIGNS of God's presence...and God's activity...and God's love and compassion and grace and mercy and healing and wholeness and peace and Shalom in our world. Let me show you what I mean.

Five of our church members eagerly wanting to share a week of their valuable time to go to Haiti next fall to help bring the healing of Christ's touch and grace of God's love to a people whose lives have been plagued by a whole BUNCH of "Medianites" in recent days. Surely, it is a SIGN that God is at work and that miracles still happen.

More than \$60,000 given by this congregation during the past year to share the love of Christ in some very real, tangible kinds of ways...money shared around the world, to be sure...but perhaps even more importantly...shared right here at home...within THIS community...among people who are hungry...sick...homeless...naked...lonely and scared – people who need to know that God is real and Christ is love and who look to US...to YOU and ME to be the proof...the sign they need in order to believe!

26 families with 60 children helped through the Sharing Tree program...39 families with more than 70 children helped through the Christmas Basket project...over 1500 meals served last year through the Dinner at the Prez – people...GOD'S people...OUR neighbors right here in this community...who have been blessed by the generosity of our love and our time and our efforts as a very real SIGN that God is still busy in our world...or at least in our little corner of the world.

The incredibly generous financial giving of the members and friends of this church family who, even in the midst of some difficult and challenging economic times, CONTINUE to bless this

congregation and its ministry beyond our wildest imaginings...surely it is a wonderfully powerful sign that the Spirit of the Lord is alive and kicking and still moving mightily in our midst!

The blessing...the absolute joy and blessing of our church staff who day in and day out offer their time...their talents...their treasure to keep this church running and make it a place where God's work continues to be done each and every day...not to mention the countless hours upon hours upon hours of time and energy and effort given by YOU, the members of this church family, who offer yourselves freely and joyously to the Lord and to this church as a SIGN...a real and tangible SIGN that Jesus Christ is alive and working and moving, not only within your own hearts...but within the heart and life of this community of faith as well.

The love and compassion and prayers and support of a church family for those in our midst who are sick or sorrowful or lonely or heartbroken...the faith that you live and the faith that you show each and every day...not just here...not just within our church family...but out in the community where you live and work and shop and play and go to school – a faith that shows EVEN and ESPECIALLY when times are tough and the “Medianites” are breathing down YOUR neck and yet you STILL manage to be persons of faith and compassion and graciousness and love and mercy – SURELY it is a SIGN of that God is real and alive and living in our midst...and MOST importantly living in YOUR life!

Oh, some people say that God doesn't do MIRACLES any more...that God doesn't provide SIGNS any more. Some folks have a difficult time SEEING God's presence and say that the signs of God's reality are few and far between these days. Some folks even think God has quit giving us SIGNS altogether. Oh, but I'm not so sure that's true.

Signs, signs, everywhere are signs, Can't you read the signs!

No, the reality is that the signs of God's presence ARE everywhere. Maybe we don't always know how to read the signs. But they're there, all right, if we'll just open our eyes to SEE them. And often times, we miss the biggest sign of all: the one that looks back at us when we stare at our reflection in the mirror.

God help us to SEE the signs, to be sure! But even MORE importantly, God help us to BE the signs of God's presence in our midst ALWAYS!

Let us pray:

Show us the signs of your presence all around us Holy God!

Help us to see you at work in our world.

Help us to feel your holy presence in our lives.

Help us to know you are Emmanuel...here...with us...in the midst of us...

O Holy One who is as close to us as the air we breathe...

as close to us as the person right beside us...

as close to us as the reflection we see in mirror...

Show us the signs, and help us to see!

But even MORE IMPORTANTLY, Help us to BE the signs of YOUR presence in our world.

For we ask it in Christ name, Amen!

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.