

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT
“SIGN AND WONDERS”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
March 1, 2009
Genesis 9:8-15 Mark 1:12-15
11:00 A.M. Service**

God gave the rainbow as a sign that we face the turmoil and trouble of life in a context of grace. God does not withhold love from us until we have proven ourselves worthy. God’s unfailing love helps us meet life’s trials.

We desire “**signs and wonders**” from God no less than those who first encountered Jesus. We tend to see faith as belief and signs as proofs. But we have many of the same signs God gave our ancestors. The rainbow was a sign for Noah. It is still a sign for us. Nature is filled with signs of God’s trustworthy love and care.

That little word *sign* has many different meanings. Most often, a *sign* is a visible piece of information: “**Wet Paint,**” “**Watch Your Step,**” “**Speed Zone Ahead.**” But a *sign* may be more subtle. In baseball, managers use strange gestures as secret *signs* of what they want their players to do. And *sign* has even larger meanings. A *sign* can be an object or an event that indicates the presence or occurrence of something else. Flowers are often given as a *sign* of affection. Then there are religious *signs*. Woody Allen said, “**If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank.**” But it’s time to be serious!

In the Bible a sign is usually a supernatural or unusual event with momentous significance. Genesis says that after the great flood God gave Noah and his descendants the rainbow as a sign that the earth would never again be destroyed by water. God’s “**rainbow**” in the clouds was a sign of God’s covenant promise. The Bible is full of signs. In early Israel, people constantly sought signs or tokens by which they might learn the will of God. And God often took the initiative in giving signs. In the 4th chapter of

Exodus, when a reluctant Moses questioned God's call, God gave him dramatic signs, such as changing his shepherd's rod into a snake and then back into a rod.

At the birth of Jesus the angels gave the shepherds a sign by which they could identify the Savior. They would find a swaddled child lying in a manger. Throughout Jesus' ministry people saw his miracles as "***signs and wonders***" that confirmed his power as the Son of God. Later, in the book of Acts, during the Apostolic Age, the Spirit of God was manifested through signs and mighty works done by the apostles. Later still, in the book of Revelations, early Christians looked for spectacular signs to herald the Second Coming of Christ and the end of history.

On this first Sunday of Lent, we are called upon to be alert and sensitive to the signs of the Spirit's presence and of God's will. Our Gospel lesson today tells us that Jesus' public ministry was immediately preceded by forty days of temptation and testing in the desert. Then Jesus appeared in Galilee, proclaiming "***the gospel of God.***" Our own trials and temptations may be signs that God is preparing us for something, perhaps to be of some special service to others in Christ's name.

Why does God use signs? Why doesn't God communicate directly? In a time of increasing candor and openness, we prefer that someone get to the point rather than beat around the bush. We ask, "**What are you trying to say?**" We insist, "**If you have something to say, say it.**" Why does God not deal with us more directly? The simplest answer is that some things cannot be expressed directly. Also, there are realities we are not capable of perceiving directly. Symbolism is expressing ideas in symbols. Iconography is the expression in art of an idea, a person, or an event. Those of biblical lands and times were prone to express their religious beliefs in symbols. Biblically, then, symbols and signs represent realities that transcend human powers of direct expression or apprehension. All of the arts have been used to express the inexpressible. All manner of objects have been used as religious images. Clay, metal, and semiprecious stones have become amulets. Statues and statuettes, mosaics, frescoes, jewelry, decorations - - all have been used to represent religious realities. But there has always been a danger involved with using signs and symbols.

The Ten Commandments begin by affirming the sovereignty of God. First, there is a prohibition against having "***other gods***"; second, there is a

prohibition against “*graven images.*” In both, idolatry is the threatening danger. But how do these ancient commandments relate to us? They primarily warn us against the subtle possibility of confusing the symbol with the reality, or the sign with the sign’s object.

The sign or symbol is secondary to the reality it represents. Signs and symbols may be interchangeable, but the reality remains what it is. Crosses, crucifixes, altars, sanctuaries, verbal and written expressions of faith, are all temporary and disposable signs pointing beyond themselves to the holy and inexpressible reality of God. Idolatry is not a petty sin. It is utterly devastating because it means the loss of our sense of the reality of God. Idolatry is clinging to the sign and losing the reality.

Without the signs and symbols of faith, however, we might also lose our sense of the reality of God. So, the issue is not whether signs and symbols are right or wrong, good or evil, but whether they are properly understood. For example, the Bible claims that the laws of Israel were a gift from God. At the time of Jesus, a group of religious leaders, the Pharisees, had made the keeping of Israel’s laws, or their own “**oral**” interpretations of those laws, an end in itself. This is the idolatry of legalism, where the keeping of rules and laws is the essence of religious faith, regardless of what is in one’s heart. Jesus continually denounced this perspective. The point is, we must remember that signs and symbols are not the same as the realities they represent.

In 312 C.E., before a battle near Rome, the emperor Constantine had a vision in which he saw these words: *In hoc signo vinces* (“**in this sign conquer**”). The sign, of course, was the cross, which remains the central and universal symbol of the Christian faith. The battle, by the way, was considered a political and military triumph for Christianity as a budding world power, but we can borrow the phrase without embracing the militaristic setting. Of all our Christian signs and symbols, none rivals the cross in representing the heart of our faith. God, in Christ, conquered the powers of sin and evil through self-giving, suffering love. We may share in this triumph, but only as the *sign* of the cross comes to represent the manner and direction of our lives.

Like the ancient seafarer Noah, we must sail at times through deep waters and stormy weather. Before the rainbow, Noah sought other signs of hope. Once he sent a raven and three times a dove to see if the waters had

subsided. The first time the dove found no place to light and returned to the ark. The second time the dove returned with an olive leaf in its beak. The third time it did not return at all. And Noah knew that his ordeal was over. Let us be alert to the little signs that have large meanings. Last Sunday we had baptisms. The waters of baptism do no good without an accompanying pledge to God.

Our times of challenge and testing help produce in us both strength of character and courageous faith. I would love to be your pastor to help you when you are going through challenging times. I would love this to be your church when you face those days of difficulty and distress that may arise in your life.