

## Reading the signs

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Let us pray, O Holy Spirit, open our ears to hear the Word and our eyes to see the signs so that we receive the peace that is beyond human understanding, and join with the angels in singing Glory to God in the highest. Amen

2020. What a year. How's it been for you? For me it meant learning new skills to teach on line, setting up a home office space that looks a bit like a pilot's cockpit with everything around me within arms reach, and trying to support and care for others without being able to see them, hug them, rejoice with them, cry with them. You will have your own stories.

For all of us though one thing has been common and that is we are far more used to signs. Everywhere we go, there is a sign outlining the Covid Safe plan – we have them on the doors out there. There are signs in shops saying enter here, exit there. There are signs in church saying sit here or actually, don't sit there. At work I had signs on the floor saying walk here, walk in this direction.

And then of course the new QR code signs. Thanks for using them on the way in.

Of course some signs are quite funny or confusing. I remember when we were travelling overseas that I a sign with the speed limit as 80km/h but about 250 metres down the road there was either a dead end or a 90 degree bend. I found that sign amusing at the time and hoped no one tried to keep that speed limit.

In the text today we hear about a sign. An angel appeared to the shepherds who were very afraid – we reflected on that part of the text last night – and said, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger .

This will be a sign to you – a baby in a manger. A sign of what? A sign that the long awaited promised Messiah is here. The Saviour is here. This is a sign of hope, of joy, of peace, of love. The love of God, the Word of God made flesh.

In the reading from Titus the apostle Paul says this,  
But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

The baby in the manger is a sign of the appearance of the kindness and love of God. It is a sign of our salvation. Not because of good things we have done, but because of his mercy. Mercy that says our sin and spiritual rebellion and all the things that plague our conscience need to be dealt with. But they will be dealt with not by us but by God himself, who in mercy sent his Son to take the punishment for the sin of the world.

Paul says this beautifully again in Ephesians 2:4-5.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

It is by grace you have been saved. And this text goes on to say how. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit. This is surely a reference to baptism as the small catechism reminds us when it says – water by itself is only water, but with the Word of God it is a life giving water which by grace gives the new birth through the Holy Spirit.

Colossians 2:12 says that in baptism we are buried with Christ and raised with him. Our sins are carried by him into death and then he gives us a share in his resurrection from the dead. All who trust him receive forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and the sure and certain promise of life eternal.

That's what the text means here at the end. In Christ and his grace, we are heirs having the hope of eternal life. An heir has an inheritance, a gift. Our inheritance is life with God, both now and for all eternity.

As you look around at Christmas there are many signs. There are Christmas cards with biblical texts or scenes. There are stars on the top of Christmas trees like we have here. There are churches as you drive around with crosses on top of them.

All those signs remind us of the significant sign spoken of in the text today - Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Of course that child that was born in a manger went to the cross. In 1 Corinthians Paul says, Jews demand signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

Christ crucified. Christ no longer in the manger but on the cross loving the world, dying for the world, saving all who look to him for forgiveness and hope. The cross, another sign.

Every time you see a font remember there is another sign, remember what God does there. He saves people through the washing of rebirth. He joins people to Christ, to his death and his resurrection and so gives them forgiveness and hope. As Peter says, this water (referring to the flood), symbolizes baptism that now saves you also.

And as we come to a close this morning, there's one more sign to look for isn't there. The Lord's Supper is more than a sign but it is also a sign. A sign with a promise. The bread and the cup, the body and blood of Christ. Take and eat, take and drink. Whoever believes these words, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins, has what they say, forgiveness of sins.

So the Supper is not just a sign pointing to something else. It is a destination. Here, this is my body, this is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

There are so many signs to look at in our world. The streets are full of them, telling us what's there, inviting us in. The shop doors are covered with signs. Even the road side is full of many signs.

In amongst all those signs, I draw your attention today to the signs God has put in place. The child in the manger, the cross, the font, the supper. Here is new life. Here is a new start. Here is genuine peace through the forgiveness of your sins and the cleansing of your conscience. Here is the reason to sing Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth. Amen.