A Sign Of The Times

Genesis 25:19-24

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I'm coming to you from the balcony this week because I wanted to talk a little about the Rose Window behind me. If you normally sit in our choir loft, this window is likely a focal point for you many Sundays. It's a beautiful window, one full of color and light, something of a beacon for us inside this room and for those who see our church from the outside. It's also a window rich with symbols and meaning.

This window was designed specifically with our sanctuary in mind, and the people who created it layered it with symbols befitting for a sanctuary. The colors were carefully chosen, particularly the reds (which represent the blood of Christ), the purples (which emphasize Jesus as king), and the white pieces around the edge. These white parts are actually lilies, recalling Jesus as the lily of the valley.

You'll also notice a lot of symbolic numerology in this window. Not all rose windows are designed with twelve petals or lobes, but ours is…because 12 is such an important number in the Christian faith, representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 disciples. Likewise, you'll notice the three-petaled flowers around the edge of the window, trinities which are also obviously key for the Christian faith.

These symbols are particularly noteworthy in our Rose Window, but they exist throughout our sanctuary. If you look carefully, you'll notice groups of three for the Trinity and groups of four for the gospels scattered on balcony rails and crown molding. You'll find crosses and crowns in our chandeliers. Even the arches of our doorways, which are pointed instead of rounded, are intended to point heavenward.

The symbols work on multiple levels. Some of these things may be symbols that are easily noticed. Others may not be quite as overt, but—especially combined together—they may still have an impact. But, according to our de facto church historian, all of these things I just named were intentionally put in this window to try to create something not only beautiful but also sacred, inspiring, and revelatory.

There is power in these symbols. The symbols convey God in a way that words and experiences cannot. In their own way, they're timeless. They speak to everyone…but what they say isn't always as universal.

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There is a theory in the study of communications that related directly toward symbolism…it's going to be easiest for me to explain it with the aid of this whiteboard, and fortunately I've got the option of doing it that way during our time of streaming-only services.

To understand this theory, it's necessary to understand some technical lingo for three different kinds of representations: the icon, the index, and the symbol.

- An index is an image that points to its source.
- An icon is something that looks like the thing it's representing.

- A symbol has a connection that has to be learned…and, as a result, it's a representative meaning that often comes later.

I find it helpful to think about these different kinds of signs with road signs:

- A school crossing sign has an image of the school, which points to its source—that's an index.
- A merge sign has an image of the actual merging—that's an icon.
- A stop sign doesn't represent the act of stopping in any way…but a red octagon is a very clear image that still connotes stopping once you've learned it. That's a symbol.

Our Christian faith is full of different representations, but some of the very best function as all three of these things at once: the cross, the communion cup, the forbidden fruit, the rainbow. Those are some of the more obvious examples. But one of the symbols that carried the most meaning for the early church—and one that I find particularly fascinating--was Noah's ark.

In the second-century catacombs outside of Rome, you will find hundreds of images etched by early Christians. You will not find a single cross…but you will find over 40 images of Noah's ark. The ark offered incredible power and hope to those early believers, and it did so by functioning as index, icon, and symbol at the same time:

- As an index, it harkened to a time of refuge, salvation, and resurrection itself. The image of the ark points to God bringing life out of death.
- As an icon: the images of the ark in those catacombs looked like the tomb itself, a box with Noah popping out similar to Jesus emerging from the tomb.
- And as a symbol, the ark pointed Christians toward an attitude of how they ought to try to live—they should attempt to float above the chaos and sin of their world, trusting that God would provide what was needed.[1]

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Returning to our Rose Window: it also functions with a trifold representation:

- The color red pointing to the blood of Christ and the numbers associated with the disciples and the trinity are indexes, pointing to the sources that they represent.
- The images of the lilies are icons, actual representations of the things they symbolize.

Those are both part of our history. The understanding of the Rose Window as a symbol has much more to do with our present. We use this image to represent our church all over the place. It shows up on cards we mail out, on our website, as our logo. We hang prints of the window in our Sunday school classrooms. We name our newsletter after it. The Rose Window has come to represent our whole church, a symbol of who we are and who we want to be.

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The catch with indexes, icons, and symbols is that they convey different things to different people, especially when one image is functioning as all three with layers of meaning. The ark might have suggested the resurrection to the early Christians, but it doesn't necessarily strike that chord for us today. Likewise, an image of a boat might suggest something about escape to someone who has been reading the Jonah story, or it might suggest an evangelistic message to someone who

[1] The discussion of signs, with these technical terms, is widespread across the field of communications. Crystal L. Downing's *Changing Signs of Truth* is an extremely helpful resource for applying these terms to Christian symbology, and she deserves credit for the Noah's ark example in this section (and for influencing this entire sermon).

adores the end of John where the disciples are fishing and eventually encounter the risen Jesus on the beach. Or it might be simply a terrifying image to someone who just watched *Jaws.* We've all had experiences with boats; those experiences inform the way that we understand and appreciate these symbols.

This is especially true for the ways that our society understands symbols over time. The ark meant something different in the second century than it does now. The Rose Window wasn't the symbol of our church when it was first installed.

This is true not only for images but also for the stories we find in the scripture.

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The scripture for today, which I'm sure you thought I'd forgotten about, is the birth story of Jacob and Esau. The Jacob and Esau relationship is a particularly fascinating one—we get the whole arc of their relationship in the scriptures. If this were a movie, you wouldn't need to take many liberties with the original text to give the two of them a full, cohesive story with peaks and valleys in all the right places. It is also a story flush with interesting imagery and symbolism, and that starts with today's scripture, the very beginning of the story.

There are several representors in the Jacob and Esau story worth focusing on, but one of the most interesting is also one of the most basic: the color red. Red shows up in a couple of different places in this story. First, it is the favored descriptor for Esau himself, who is described as coming out of the womb "red and hairy." Jacob, by contrast, is described only in his relation to Esau.

Then, later in the story, Esau is curiously and intensely drawn to the stew that Jacob is cooking, and he oddly identifies it as red, saying "give me some of that red stuff." This is especially odd when we learn later that Jacob has prepared lentil stew, not typically a red dish. For Esau to identify it as red and for the author to include that detail seems significant, especially given the appearance of the color red as a descriptor of the newborn Esau. There is a strong connection between Esau and things red. The question is why?

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This is where it becomes helpful to think about the different ways that images connote meaning to us. First as an icon: red is an earthy color, the actual color of clay; most scholars believe that Esau is meant to be a "man of the earth," not only from his color but also from his description as a hunter. The description of both Esau and of the stew as red function as an icon for the clay of the earth, establishing Esau as a rugged worker who comes directly from the dirt below and sustains himself on the same.

Red is also a passionate color: it is the color we associate with blazing anger, with courage under fire, and with swooning love. It makes sense that Esau—the red one—would express himself as famished and "about to die." He is not given to subtleties or soft expressiveness. He is the embodiment of the color red. In this way, red is functioning as an index: we associate these things with the color red because it's the color of blood. Esau's color points to the source of his passion.

To understand how "red" works as a symbol, it becomes necessary to know a little Hebrew. The Hebrew word for "red" is אדום ("Adom"). If that sounds an awful lot like "Adam," it's because the two words are homophones in Hebrew. They consist of the exact same consonants…along with

the Hebrew word for “stew.” The writer of this story is using multiple puns to connect Esau with Adam: another man who quite literally came from the earth.

The signifier of the color red, then, is suggesting some very specific things about Esau: he is a man, a “manly man,” one with fiery passion and a ruggedness but not one who makes great decisions.

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In this story, it’s hard to depict Esau as an admirable guy. Instead, he just comes off as not too bright. His passion has no focus, no purpose. It’s out of control and will only serve to mislead him. Likewise, his work ethic is pointed in the wrong direction. He may have spent the day working in the field, but he only notices that this work has made him hungry. He exhibits no sense of satisfaction or accomplishment, no recognition of contributing to his family. In fact, he exhibits no awareness of his family at all. He fails to appreciate the birthright given to him by Isaac or the stew given to him by Jacob. Because we do not admire him, it’s entirely possible that we also feel no sympathy for him, even though he has lost something very important. Even though the Lord has said he will lose again to Jacob. Objectively, with a literary eye, I know this. But personally, I’ve always had a soft spot for Esau.

I’ve had a soft spot for him in part because he’s the oldest, and there’s something there I identify with. But I also have a soft spot for him because of how this story turns out.

It is impossible for me to read the beginning of the Jacob & Esau story without also considering the near-end of it: the moment where Jacob return from his journey with wives and children and slaves and livestock and pauses before returning to Esau. Jacob approaches his twin like a man preparing for battle…and Esau greets him by excitedly running to him and embracing him.

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Esau is no longer the earthy man described in harsh verbs like “famished” and “despised.” He is no longer an unsympathetic fool but rather one who recognizes the value of what he has nearly lost. Once egocentric, he now values his family and inquires about them. He has become the picture not only of passion but also of compassion.

Esau never gets his birthright back. He does not need it to become the man that he becomes.

Esau’s red may be what stokes his temper, but it’s also what causes him to feel strongly enough to welcome his brother with exuberance, warmth, and a hug. In doing so, he is also redefining what it means to be a “man of the earth.” He is changing the way we understand the color red as a symbol, as a sign.

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The whole story, of course, functions as a sign…and that sign, too, has changed. When I was a child, the story was presented to me entirely as a tale of family squabble and forgiveness. It was a lesson to value your siblings and your loved ones. The hope was that I would learn from Esau’s mistake and treasure the gifts my ancestors had to pass down to me, not to trade them in for a bowl of soup. And the hope was also that I would learn from Jacob’s mistake and treasure my sibling and loved ones, not to con them out of things that were important just because I saw

opportunity knocking. The story of Jacob and Esau still works on that level, still teaches those lessons.

But when I read it now, other sections jump out at me, especially the warning that God extends to Rebekah. God does not say "two children" are warring inside of her, but rather "two nations." Jacob, by the time he returns to Esau, has already been bequeathed the name "Israel," father of the nation of Israel. This is not just a story about two brothers, about the way that individuals interact with one another. It is not just a story about a birthright. It is a story about entire nations of people warring with each other, wrestling over their own sense of birthright.

The story has come to symbolize something else entirely.

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The problem with this is that sometimes the sign changes so much that the layers make it difficult to discern the meaning confidently. In high school, I really liked the Christian fish symbol…there was something elegant in the simplicity of those two curved lines. I liked the story, apocryphal or not, of people making that sign in the sand as a way of communicating something sacred to each other. I liked what a fish connotes about life and sustenance, about being "fishers of men," about water itself.

Then, when I was in college, that fish took off. They were showing up everywhere—T-shirts, Bible covers, church logos. I especially remember them on cars…it seemed like every auto parts store was selling them right next to the pine tree air fresheners.

The power of that sign became diluted to me, and I think for others as well. I remember a preacher I heard in college admitting that he'd bought one to put on his car, but he was determined not to put it on his motorcycle. He couldn't be confident enough about what the sign would communicate.

This is where the manifold meaning behind a sign and behind the scripture differs. With a sign, especially a sign that functions as index/icon/symbol all at once, we have to be particularly aware of what we're communicating. There may come a time when a sign no longer conveys what we want it to. The reason you won't find any crosses in the Roman catacombs is that, to the early Christians, the cross represented Christ's torture and death instead of his resurrection. If a sign as prevalent as the cross can transition from meaning something wholly negative to something wholly positive, then anything can.

The scriptures themselves, however, are truly timeless.

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The story of Jacob and Esau—especially this beginning part—is still about two brothers who can't get along. It will never stop being that. But once it becomes more than that, once the symbol of the story starts to convey other layers and interpretations, it can no longer be simply a story about brothers who can't get along. The layers can't be erased, no matter how old or how new they are.

When we are evaluating what our symbols, our signs, and our stories are saying, we have to recognize all of the different layers. Sometimes, it might mean that the symbol that speaks the most to us is the wrong one for a different audience or a different era.

Many of the signs and symbols in our sanctuary, including the ones in our Rose Window, are 160 years old. Some of their meanings are that old, too…but some of the meanings they convey are much more recent. These representations hold their power because they are timeless…and because they are timely. They speak to us both across generations and to the particular place in history we find ourselves…but what they say may not be exactly the same at any given point in time. They do this because they are layered, functioning as indexes, icons, and symbols at the same time, and carrying our own experiences and comprehension in addition to the intentions of those who created them.

This terrifies me, but it also puts me in awe. Symbols are powerful. Like anything powerful, that can be dangerous.

Our signs and symbols evolve. We determine how to define them…and, in doing so, we determine how they define us.