

“Signs of Love”
Luke 2:1–20
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
December 25, 2022

Many of us receive Christmas letters from friends, reflecting on the year and perhaps the meaning of Christmas. Some of us may send letters like this. It’s always nice to catch up on what’s happening with people we know and love, even if the reflections are of varied quality. This year I received a letter from Brian Blount, the president of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia where I did doctoral work. I do not know him personally, he was not there when I was, but I found his letter particularly moving and insightful.

He begins by talking about what he calls “the Pop Pop wave,” his father’s parting gesture, and he includes a picture of his father giving this wave as he stands in front of his walker in a senior care facility. It is not a fussy wave with hands wildly gesticulating, as if to ward off insects, nor is it a regal wave like Queen Elizabeth’s. His father just holds his hand in the air, straight up toward heaven, palm facing forward, his smiling face beaming beneath. Much has changed in recent years, as Blount’s mother passed away and his father moved to the facility, but the wave continues. It is not a goodbye but a way of saying, “I’ll see you again soon.” It is a sign.

Gestures or signs like this are important in communal and family life, Blount continues, sounding now more like a seminary president than a son. In the Christian family, he says, the cross is such a sign, God’s way of saying, “I go away so that I might return — with the gift of life.” But before that, God offers another sign, one that says “Hello!” Christmas — it is God’s way of saying, “I see you, and I am coming for you. I am with you, Immanuel. Can’t see the child? Let me light the way with a star. Let me point the way with shepherds and angels. Let me illumine the way with magi.” The text says — *This shall be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger* - not just a baby born, but God arriving, to be with us and for us.

That is what this day is about. It is easy to get caught up in all the cultural wrappings and lose sight of this sacred truth. But it is also easy to become so enamored of the details of the story that we lose sight of its meaning. There is value in drawing closer to understand a story, but there is also value in backing up to get a larger perspective.

Yes, there are shepherds and angels and later magi. Yes, a baby is born and placed in a manger. But what does it mean? Babies are born every day, lots of them during covid, imagine that! What is so special about this child? The Gospel according to John puts it this way. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).”

The Word became flesh and lived among us... “Incarnation” is the theological term. In this one frail life, God takes on human flesh. It is a central teaching of our faith, but one that gets less attention than it deserves. Christmas seems to get more press than Good Friday or Easter in our culture, but in theology, the crucifixion and resurrection receive much more attention than the incarnation.

All three are central teachings, but incarnation deserves more attention than it gets. It is critical in its own right, but it is also essential for our understanding of crucifixion. God doesn’t just send some kind man to die for others, as in other sacrificial systems. A part of God’s own self dies on the cross.

Incarnation is prerequisite to everything else we believe about Jesus. God comes to offer us companionship and teach us about life, to address our brokenness and offer us healing, to give us hope for eternal life. And Jesus’ birth is a sign of all of this, God’s way of saying, “I am with you and for you,” God’s way of showing us love.

Like all signs, it is something to hold on to, something to remember, something to look at when we have lost our way and pondered giving up. When we see this child in a manger, such a simple image of something so profound, we remember that we are not alone, God is with us. We are not without hope; God is still working for us.

And there are other signs of love. According to Matthew 11, when John the Baptist was in prison, he heard about what Jesus was doing. And so, he sent his disciples to ask him if he was the one to come or

whether everyone should wait for another. Jesus said, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me (Matthew 11:4-6).”

Jesus’ answer to the yearning for a reason to believe was to point to signs of God’s realm coming near. These signs provided tangible evidence of God’s love. Such signs are all around us to this day — in experiences of healing, in acts of compassion, in the willingness to share the good news about Jesus with others.

In fact, we not only see such signs all around us, but we also often are the signs for others. We are the ones who put a human face on God’s love by visiting the sick and grieving, sharing food and clothing with those in need, caroling for the homebound, sharing gifts and kindness with children and families. There are many signs of God’s love for the world, and they all go back to the sign in a Bethlehem stable, God’s message of, “I see you and I am coming for you,” a child who brings hope for us and all the world, Emmanuel, God with us.

In his award-winning novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* Gabriel Garcia Marquez describes a village where people have been infected with a contagious kind of amnesia. It begins with older members of the community but works its way down to the younger folk until all the people are forgetting the names of common objects. One young man decides to attempt to limit the damage by putting labels on everything. “This is a table,” “This is a window,” “This is a cow; it has to be milked every morning.” On the main road at the entrance to town he puts up two large signs. One reads, “The name of our village is Macondo.” The other, the largest of all, reads, “God exists.”

Signs can be immensely helpful in the midst of many challenges. It is easy to lose our way, to forget who we are, to question our beliefs and doubt not just the people around us but the God who loves us. On this day, we look to a sign that is unmistakable — a child in a manger, born among common people in an animal shed, yet somehow God in the flesh; hope for the world, a hope that cannot be denied!