

“Looking for Signs”  
delivered Sunday, January 17, 2010  
by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC  
John 2:1-11

There is a lot of evidence that people are looking for signs of God’s presence these days. Just last month, in early December, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published the results of a survey that found Americans are mixing up traditional faith claims with all kinds of other beliefs. Over twenty percent of those who claim the Christian faith say they also believe in – reincarnation, astrology, and that spiritual energy is pulsing from things like mountains, trees and crystals. A growing number of people believe in ghosts and I’m not talking about the Holy one. The report puts it this way: “our religious landscape is the increasingly complicated cacophony of spirituality in America – a mash-up of traditional faiths, fantasy and mythology,” while people search for signs of the divine. (1)

Now, I have no interest in taking away what may be comforting touch points for people discerning what they believe, but such a report does urge a church like Shandon to be as straightforward and clear as we can to proclaim the Christian faith. What we celebrate – particularly in these weeks after Christmas – is that the creation is holy in that it bears the creative fingerprints of God, but when we are most in need of a sign pointing to God, the miracle of the incarnation is not that God is in the mountain, tree, rock, or stars. Rather, God comes to us in person. Where we are most likely to find God’s presence is within the human family where God has chosen to dwell among us – in Christ – full of grace and truth.

I heard this truth of the gospel proclaimed most profoundly from a pastor in Haiti earlier this week. Whenever there is a disaster of such magnitude, questions naturally arise asking, “Where is God in this?” As the images of death and desolation and despair assault our senses we cannot help but find ourselves asking, “Where can we possibly find God in this?” And, as with the Southeast Asia tsunami and Hurricane Katrina a few years ago, some will automatically – albeit wrongly – suggest that such a natural disaster must come from the hand of God. If God is all powerful, they propose, then God must have been the cause of this, or at the very least, God held back and did not keep it from happening. But our Presbyterian understanding of God would side with the Haitian pastor who countered such claims this week saying: “We will show the world that God has not doomed the people of Haiti.”

God, who sent his son to suffer and die for the world, is there amid the rubble, with us aching and grieving. Just as God created human beings to be free, so also there is freedom in the natural order of things. If you are looking for signs of the presence of God in Haiti now, look at the people – behold the face of Christ in the people – that is where God is – among the injured, the dying, the relief workers, all – suffering beside them, bringing life out of unbearable loss. “We will show the world that God has not doomed the people of Haiti,” that Haitian pastor said, because he knows where to look for the signs that point to presence of God.

Early in his ministry, according to the Gospel of John, there was a sign that pointed to who Jesus is. John says very plainly that when Jesus changed water into wine, this was the first of his signs, revealing his glory; and the disciples believed in him. What kind of sign was it, exactly, this astonishing miracle that elicited immediate faith? We see a world in need, and we believe in one who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. In a world where for so many

there is not clean water – let alone fine wine – where is the extravagance of God? What does it mean that Jesus saved the day by turning gallons of water into wine?

We Presbyterians, who pride ourselves on doing things decently and in order, would feel better, I suspect, if the first miracle of Jesus could have been somehow more substantial than changing water into wine. Maybe raising someone from the dead, or feeding hungry crowds, or healing some diseases. But no, instead it was socking away a month's supply of cabernet sauvignon, in order to keep a small town wedding party from going bad. Nonetheless, this was somehow a sign – that Jesus is God in person – and he showed up first at a wedding reception among ordinary people – with the family and friends of a couple whose wedding pictures are so faded we can no longer make out their faces, we have forgotten their names, but we remember everybody had the time of their life because God poured forth blessings with unimaginable generosity. As Lutheran preacher John Vannorsdall said once, our God is not sensible about these things. All through the biblical narrative from the Old Testament into the New, God always sent “far too much – too much wine at the wedding, too many quail in the wilderness, too many fish for the disciples to pull in the net, five thousand fed and still basketsful of bread left over...” And in Jesus Christ – God went so far overboard: “God loved so extravagantly that God's equilibrium was lost and God fell in person to the earth...” (2)

Even with the world around us spinning in chaos, a world reeling with natural disasters that no one could easily explain away, a world at war with itself, a world of huge disparities between rich and poor, God wants us to linger at this wedding reception in Cana, to enjoy the party, to spend time with this Jesus who was at home in small towns, and among unimportant people. This, after all, is only the first sign, and if we hang around enjoying the over-the-top abundance of having God in our midst here, then we may very well begin to see other signs. “Most people serve the best wine first,” the steward said, “but you have kept the best until now...” reminding us that with Jesus Christ there is always more than enough, and what is better – is still to come. Here at the beginning of the gospel, you see, we have a sign that points ahead. This one who today is the life of the party, will move forward feeding the masses, curing diseases, raising the dead to new life, giving his life for love of the world, being raised himself – so that all who believe in him may have a taste of what it means to be called “children of God.” (3) Today, we simply have to settle for a sign, that what is better is still to come.

This weekend our nation pauses to celebrate the memory of one who also understood the signs that point to God. In a season in our country that, for far too many, was bleak, violent, and oppressive, Martin Luther King, Jr., saw the signs pointing to the presence of God, and the abundant generosity God intends for all people. Some years past the day when King's famous “I Have a Dream” speech was delivered, historians realized there were signs that pointed to that very moment in which the Civil Rights Movement really took hold. Many thought that King's famous speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial was born out of the emotion and inspiration of that critical moment in 1963, but it was not. That address was an old sermon polished up for that occasion, King had probably preached countless times between 1956 and 1963. Admittedly those words, “I have a dream,” were transformative in a new way by the context of that critical moment before Washington's Mall packed with believers in the dream.

But did you know how early in his ministry there were signs pointing to what he was to say that day? Listen to these words Martin Luther King, Jr., preached as the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, his very first parish. He was fresh out of seminary, with the ink not even dry on his diploma when he said: “The dream is one of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed...A dream of a land where people do not argue that

the color of a person's skin determines the content of his character. A dream of a place where all of our gifts and resources are held, not for ourselves alone, but as an instrument of service for the rest of humanity. The dream of a country where every person will respect the dignity and worth of all humanity." (4) That sermon was preached seven years before the march on Washington. And yet we can see now in these words from his earliest days in ministry that Dr. King saw the signs revealed early in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

By the presence of God in the person of Jesus – his followers will discover that like barrels of water overflowing with wine we have more than enough – more than enough strength and the courage to love beyond measure, more than enough generosity to reach out in service where there is need, more than enough power to right the wrongs of injustice, more than enough to feed, and to heal, and to share God's abundance. More than enough simply because we believe in Jesus Christ who gives us as sign that says, the best is yet to come, the best is yet to come. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) "Charles Blow, "Paranormal Flexibility," New York Times online, 12/11/09; "Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths," Pew statistics published 12/9/09.
- 2) John Vanorsdall, "A Nice Barrel of Wine," The Protestant Hour, 1989.
- 3) Carol Hess, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4, p. 262.
- 4) P.C. Enniss, "Remembering Martin," preached at Trinity Presbyterian, Atlanta, 1/18/98.