

“GOD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS:
III – THROUGH ORDINARY THINGS”

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Genesis 8:1-12

Luke 24:13-35

Well, God did it again! I was well on my way to getting this sermon done, and God came along and provided the perfect sermon illustration! Let me explain. The sermon today is about signs God gives us to remind us that he is always here, and that no matter what, things are going to be okay, because he'll always make a way.

I have a lot of signs to talk about, but as I said, God made sure of that the other night, because on Thursday night, just as we finished an Administrative Council meeting, during which, by the way, we could hear that the heavens had opened up and torrential rain was pouring down out of the sky, we walked out into the parking lot and were stopped in our tracks by the sight of one of the most beautiful rainbows ever! And, the hint of a double rainbow above it!

I know many of you saw it because if there was one picture of it on Facebook, there was twenty – all as beautiful as the one before. It was breathtaking, and surely a sign from God that he is always here, and no matter what, no matter how severe the rainfall, it's going to be okay, because he makes a way.

We need signs like that every once in a while, don't we? Life tends to be like that torrential rainfall Thursday night. Sometimes things rage out of control, and we need a sign from God telling us it's going to be okay.

I know you've all had signs from God like that, because you've told me about them. I can't remember if I told you about some literal signs that helped me out one scary day. It was a long time ago, and Dad, Mom and I were on a trip out west. We flew into Denver, rented a car and then made a big loop through Colorado, Wyoming, North Dakota and so on. We saw Yellowstone, Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse and more. Then, one day, we made the journey from Jackson Hole, Wyoming over a mountain pass to another spot in Wyoming.

I was driving, Mom was in the front passenger seat, and Dad was in the back working on a crossword puzzle. It was a beautiful sunny day as we left Jackson Hole and started our journey. I remember seeing a sign at the start of our ascent up the mountain pass that said something about this road being closed in winter because it was often impassable, but it wasn't winter, so up we went. It was one of

those windy, curvy, roads up and up the mountain, and every once in a while you would see an elevation sign telling you how far up you were. It was a beautiful day and a great trip, until, in the blink of an eye, things changed. The sun went behind some clouds, and out of the blue, it started to snow.

At first, it was sweet. “Oh, isn’t this nice, a little snow to make it pretty.” Then, pretty quickly, it was not so nice. The snow got heavier. Bear in mind, now, that we’re on our way to the top, there’s nowhere to turn around, even if we wanted to, so on we went.

Very quickly, the situation got serious. In order to quell my nerves and Mom’s nerves, I was making jokes about it. Meanwhile, Dad was in the back seat still working the puzzle!

Then, suddenly, things turned pretty treacherous. The snow was so thick and heavy, that I could hardly see anything. All I could see, literally, was the tracks of the vehicle in front of me, so I just stayed in them, knowing that, if that vehicle went off the road, so would we.

To say I was scared to death, is an understatement. It was all I could do not to panic. But here’s where God sent me a sign – literally through signs – those elevation signs that appeared every once in a while on the side of the road. I glanced at one point and saw that we had reached the top, and then each subsequent sign let me know that we were on the way down, and with every passing sign, I breathed a little easier, knowing that it was going to be okay.

And before long, it was. The snow let up a little, then a lot, then it stopped, and before we knew it, we were back in brilliant sunshine and warm breezes. When we got to the bottom, we stopped at a little place called “The Cowboy Café” in DuBois, Wyoming. I bought a mug there that day and everytime I take it out of the cupboard to use it, I remember that trip and those blessed elevation signs – and how God guided me home that day.

Signs. Throughout history, God has given his people signs to guide their way, and to reassure them that he is always there, and always makes a way. In the first lesson this morning, from the Book of Genesis, it’s Noah who sees a sign.

Surely you know Noah’s story. God, out of nothing, created everything and called it good. He created humanity to have dominion over creation, and it was good, until it wasn’t. Humanity made a mess of everything, and God was disgusted with it all, so he decided to start over. He would send a flood, and he chose Noah to be the one to carry one. He chose Noah to build an ark, to bring in two of every kind of creature to carry on, and so he did.

It was far from easy, and it was incredibly scary. The rains started and it looked like they would never end. Everywhere he looked, Noah saw devastation and defeat. Day after day, he wondered when it would end, if it would end. When he saw the tops of mountains, he had some hope, but still he wondered. So he sent out birds to see if there was a dry place to land. First he sent a raven, then, he sent a dove. But there was still no dry place to land.

Finally, one day, Noah gently lifted a dove into the sky and let it go. He waited and waited and that evening, that beautiful dove came back to him, and in its beak was an olive branch, a sign that things were okay now – that the waters had subsided – it was going to be okay.

That's all it took – that little sign of an olive branch – to lift Noah's spirits and head him and all of them into a new future. When he saw that dove and that olive branch, Noah remembered God, and knew that God was making a way into a new world, a new future for his people.

You know, perhaps that's why doves and olive branches are still symbols of hope and peace. They remind us things can always get better, because God is here, and God can make a way. Beautiful signs, still today.

In the Gospel lesson, we find two other signs. The lesson, as you heard, took place after Jesus had died on the cross at Calvary. His disciples are despondent and two of them are walking on the road to Emmaus, when they encounter a stranger. It was Jesus, but they didn't recognize him. He asked them why they are upset and they told him that their Savior Jesus had been killed, and the women had told them his body was gone, and now they didn't know what was going on.

When Jesus heard this, he began to share scriptures with them about who he was and how he was the fulfillment of scripture. They listened, but still didn't recognize him.

The day wore on, and as they were about to part company with him, they invited him to stay with them instead of walking into the night alone. So he did. And when they sat down at the table, he took the bread, lifted it up, gave thanks to God for it, broke it and gave it to those two men, and when he did, suddenly their eyes were opened, and they recognized it was Jesus, right there with them! He was indeed alive, and right there with them! The horror of the days past were over, their hopelessness was gone, everything was new and good and possible.

In the bread broken, God gave them a sign that he was there, had always been there, and when they couldn't see a future, he made it come to pass – he made a way.

Signs! All around us, if we have eyes to see, God gives us signs – reminding us of his presence, his power and his promise to be with us always, making a way through everything.

This morning, I want to spend a few moments talking about two more signs – signs that have touched our church family. The first sign is pretty nondescript – it's an ordinary two-pocket folder, like kids use in school.

It showed up about say fifteen years or so ago, and it was the creation of a woman named Sandy Wherry, who was joining our staff as the Coordinator of Youth Ministries. In that folder were twelve pages, one for every month of the year, and on each of those pages was listed activities, programs, events for the youth of our church.

Flip through it and you would have seen things like programs about prayer, bullying, Bible study; events like the Conference Youth Rally, and the music festival Creation; mission trips to Kentucky and elsewhere; and service projects for our church and for groups outside the church like the Domestic Violence Center.

One of those folders showed up in the hands of our youth and parents every year since then. It was a sign that, in a world where youth often wandered, and indeed wondered if they mattered, they did matter here at this church – that God was here, and God was making a way for them, and God had sent Sandy to be with them on their journey of faith. Those folders were more than just schedules for what was to happen throughout the coming year, those folders were signs of a way and persons God was using to lead young people to Jesus Christ.

Truth be told, not everything was included in those folders. Those folders didn't show the other things that helped lead youth to Christ – the times Sandy showed up at their games, concerts, shows and other events; the letters of reference she wrote for them; the times she listened to them when they were troubled. Those things you won't find in those folders, but they were there.

And though the last folder that Sandy prepared has now been closed, and this chapter in her life and ours is coming to an end, the God who is always here, will make a new way for her in her retirement and a new way for us as a church – because he always does. No doubt, we'll see signs coming about that too!

The other sign I want to talk about is a baton. No, not a baton like a majorette twirls, but a musical baton that a director uses to lead a choir. Another sign that God used for us in this church ten years ago when we were looking for new leadership for our choir.

Who knew that God would send us one of our own? Talk about God working in mysterious ways. Who knew he would send us someone who we watched grow up in this church? Well, God did, and clearly, God knew best.

For ten years ago, Steve Gilmore picked up that baton and began his work with our music ministry, and what a difference he has made. Each year the choir grew, each year it seemed we had to add more chairs, each year they tackled harder music, each year they gave us wonderful and inspiring Christmas and Easter cantatas. Each year we could see the members growing closer, we could sense that esprit de corps! We could see the joy they had singing together and being together, and it started with the ever present smile on Steve's face. For ten years, he's encouraged them, supported them, and even challenged them. It's been quite a journey.

Steve and his baton have travelled thousands and thousands of miles these past ten years. Trips from Washington DC every Wednesday and Baltimore every Sunday year round to do this job God called him to do – and do it in such a faithful and joyful way. We couldn't ask any more of him, even though, selfishly, we'd like to. Instead, we wish him well, and know that God will give him a sign of what he wants him to do next. And we know that the God who is always present, will make a way for us as well, and it will be okay – for all of us.

Signs! God does work in mysterious ways, but he always shows us signs, to remind us that, no matter what, he is with us, and no matter what, he will make a way into a new future. Thanks be to God for signs – for rainbows, road signs, for olive branches and loaves of bread, for folders filled with plans and musical batons.

Friends, let's keep our heads up and our eyes open, for the signs God yet will reveal. May it be so.

Amen.