



“A Sign from the Lord”
Scripture – Isaiah 7:10-16
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, December 18, 2016

Pi Patel is a curious young man ... particularly about faith, and the God who inspires it. He is on a quest to learn about the divine from any and every religious leader he can find, for he just wants to love God. Perhaps you have met Pi; he’s the main character in Yann Martel’s 2001 novel, *The Life of Pi* ...

Growing up in southern India, Pi Patel is raised on stories of the Hindu gods, who dazzle mortals with their power. There is the story of the god, Krishna, who – as a baby – holds the universe in his mouth. And, the story of Vishnu, who comes to earth as a dwarf, but assumes cosmic proportions and strides across heaven in order to win a challenge. They are stories – Pi explains – of “God as God should be. With shine and power and might. Such as can rescue and save and put down evil.”¹

But, as a teenager, Pi discovers Christianity, and is confronted with a very different portrait of God. Being the curious sort, he spends several afternoons sipping tea with a Catholic Priest, who introduces him to another story – the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At first, Pi cannot fathom the God of whom Father Martin speaks; this Hindu teenager finds Jesus infuriating and intriguing and downright inconceivable. He balks at this Son of God, and lifts up the great irony of our faith to his new friend, Father Martin:

“This Son,” Pi exclaims, “[This Son]... who goes hungry, who suffers from thirst, who gets tired, who is sad, who is anxious, who is heckled and harassed, who has to put up with followers who don’t get it and opponents who don’t respect Him – what kind of a god is that? It’s a god on too human a scale, that’s what ... This Son is a god who spent most of His time telling stories, *talking*. This Son is a god who walked, a pedestrian god – and in a hot place, at that – with a stride like any human stride, the sandal reaching just above the rocks along the way; and when He splurged on transportation, it was a regular donkey. This Son is a god who died in three hours, with moans, gasps and laments. What kind of a god is that? What is there to inspire in this Son? Love,’ said Father Martin.”²

Pi finds this unabashedly human god baffling ... but, eventually, with Father Martin’s explanations, strangely compelling. Still, the question Pi poses to Father Martin is a wise and poignant one: What kind of God is that? What *is* there to inspire in this Son?

¹ Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi* (New York: Harcourt Books, 2001), 70.

² Ibid, 70.

This Son, who goes hungry and suffers thirst, is the one Isaiah announces in today's Scripture lesson ... or, at least, the one Isaiah *prophesies* ... This Son is the child we will come to call 'Immanuel,' because he shows the world that God is with us fully.

As our lesson begins, it is clear we are entering a story that is already underway. The Lord has been speaking to Ahaz, reassuring this king that he, and all of Judah, have nothing to fear. You see – Ahaz is in crisis; he is living in a city under attack as the kings of Syria and of the now estranged Kingdom of Israel move against Jerusalem. As readers, we are being thrust into a political drama, the details of which are interesting to Bible nerds and history buffs, but are not essential for our purposes today. The point is that Ahaz is shaking in his boots as hostile armies beat at the gates of Jerusalem.

But Ahaz should have nothing to fear, for the Lord is with him. God speaks to the king through the prophet Isaiah, saying: *Do not be afraid. Stand firm in faith.*

This is where we pick up the story, the words '*stand firm in faith*' still ringing in the king's ears. This is when God makes the (unbelievably) generous invitation we hear about at the beginning of today's lesson. Just in case Ahaz needs something tangible to bolster his faith, the Lord offers him a sign. "Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven," God says.

It is a stunning gesture ... As one scholar puts it, the Lord of heaven and earth makes "power available to Ahaz in a seemingly limitless manner."³ In other words, the cosmos is the divine playground, and Ahaz can request any trick in the book. "Would you like to see me hold the universe in my mouth, or stride across heaven? Ask, and you shall receive."

God's offer is one we would expect any person of faith to welcome with open arms. Goodness knows, many of us have longed for a sign from God in our own moments of crisis. As the world crumbles around us, how we have begged the Almighty to gesture toward the heavens and say, "What sign would you like to see?" Every once in a while, we all need something tangible to bolster our faith. But Ahaz refuses: "I won't ask," he says. "I won't test the Lord."

It *sounds* like a pious response. It *sounds* like Ahaz has taken God's words to heart and is standing firm in faith. 'Who needs a sign? I trust the Lord to rescue me!'

Here's the problem: Ahaz is *not* standing firm in faith. We know from another account of this event that Ahaz has done the opposite of 'stand firm in faith.' Rather than trusting God, he has run screaming into the arms of Tiglath-pileser, the all-powerful ruler of Assyria. In his plea for help, Ahaz has pledged his allegiance and his gold to this foreign tyrant. He has put his faith in an earthly Lord, rather than the Lord of all creation. God has every right to turn away in exasperation and say, "Have it your way; you're on your own."

But, instead of brushing off this faith-less king, God responds – as God so faithfully does – with grace. The Lord offers *another* sign. No, *insists upon* a sign. Despite Ahaz's rejection, God is determined to show the people of Judah that the divine presence is sure, that the Holy One has not – and will not – abandon this people in crisis.

And this is where the passage gets interesting ... the Lord of heaven and earth, who has given Ahaz his pick of any trick in the divine playbook, *chooses* a surprising sign for Ahaz and his people: "The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel."

³ Michael J. Chan, "Isaiah 7:10-16 Commentary," www.workingpreacher.org

This is the sign that God chooses: the birth of a child – of a helpless babe. The Lord of all creation who tamed chaos and set the cosmos in motion; who commanded the sun to shine and sculpted mountains as if from clay; who fashioned the great sea monsters and enlivened dust with a single breath – this God chooses to act through a tiny baby with a powerful name.

This – remember – is the same God who drew back the waves so an enslaved people could go free, and who led the Israelites with pillars of cloud and fire. The same God who sweeps over a graveyard and stirs dry bones to life ... As that curious teenager, Pi Patel, would say: “This is God as God should be. With shine and power and might. Such as can rescue and save and put down evil.”

But at this moment, that is *not* how God chooses to act. This is *not* the sign God picks. As enemies beat at the gates of Jerusalem and the people cower in fear, the Lord chooses an infant as the sign of divine love and grace. God does not choose ‘shine and power and might,’ but vulnerability and weakness.

If we did *not* know the rest of the story, we would stare in disbelief at Isaiah – the messenger of God – just as Pi Patel must have stared at Father Martin, and said: “What kind of a god is that? What is there to inspire in this Son?”

But, we do know the rest of the story. And, we know that Father Martin’s answer is absolutely right: Love ... Love. That is what moves the Lord of the Cosmos to forgo shine and power and might and be born in a stable, crude and bare. And that is what has inspired such devotion from countless followers throughout the centuries: Love.

This prophecy of Isaiah is probably not referring to Jesus of Nazareth; most scholars agree that the language of this passage suggests the young woman is already pregnant, and the son she bears will see the end of this present conflict, even before he is weaned. But, we also know this promise to be true in another time, for another people in crisis. A young woman does give birth to a son who is Immanuel – God with us. This child is a sign from the Lord for all time, and for all people: A sign that God *chooses* to draw near in surprising ways ...!

This is the greatest act of love the world could ever imagine – that God would give up power and might to become one of us. To enter into this world as a helpless child – who soiled his diapers and kept his parents awake at night; who nicked his finger on tools in his father’s carpentry shop ... Who went hungry and suffered thirst; who grew tired and felt sad. ... Who walked, a pedestrian god ... with a stride like any human stride ...” Who ultimately went to the cross and knew death, that we might know life.

God dwelled among us as the one we call ‘Immanuel’ so that we might know there are no limits to God’s love for us. Turns out, it *is* a sign as deep as the grave and as high as heaven, even as it becomes manifest in the unexpected form of a child – a babe we can receive into our arms, just as we receive him into our hearts. This is God with us – fully, truly with us – not in displays of power, but in the finite and the fragile ... in flesh and blood signs that we can reach out and touch. This is God with us, that we might recognize God in the times of crisis as well as the everyday miracles of life – in cards that brighten your hospital room, and in long-time friends who come to your father’s funeral; in a helping hand or a quiet listening presence; in water that washes over us, and in bread that satisfies our hunger.

God continues to show up in the unexpected; in the flesh and blood, in the weak and vulnerable; in the ordinary signs that God is with us.

So, what kind of a god is that? What is there to inspire in this Son? Love. Radical love.

Prayers of the People ~ Greg Jones

God of all creation, in this season of gift-buying and gift-giving, we pause to ponder the gift of your son. A mere handful of days from celebrating the birth of the babe in Bethlehem, we pray that we will be filled with child-like anticipation so that we swing open the window of our soul and allow Christ to be born in us once again.

Like the magi who spotted the star glowing in the night sky, wipe the sleep from our eyes so that we may perceive your radiance amid the jagged darkness of our world. Like those shepherds watching their flocks long ago, unstop our ears so that we may hear the angels singing of peace on earth and goodwill to all.

Ever-creating God, your love for the world has persisted since the dawn of time, and your light glows in every soul, yet we do not permit its full brilliance to shine. We cover it with the sheet of self-centeredness, we overlay it with the blanket of envy, we obscure it with the quilt of deception, we shroud it with the afghan of anger, and we conceal it with the bedspread of indifference. God, help us to peel back the covers so that your light of love may blaze within us.

Gracious God, the birth of Christ declares your never-ending love for us. There is nothing we can do to earn it, nothing we can do to halt it, and nothing we can do to repay it. Teach us to receive your gift of love, by knowing in the core of our being that you give us the gift of life, you cherish us and desire good things for us, you give us second chances when we fumble our opportunities, you provide us with an amazing creation teeming with life, and you show us the path to true riches.

God of resurrection, we pray not only to receive your love, but to be transformed by it. Infuse our heart with gratitude for the blessings that step into our lives each day. Enchant our soul so that we may go beneath the surface and experience the wonders of life. Fill us with joy so that we may savor pleasure, happiness, laughter, and satisfaction.

Eternal God, we pray not only to receive your love and to be transformed by it, but we pray that we might multiply it by sharing it with others. Prompt us to extend compassion to people who are hurting; challenge us to forgive someone who has wronged us; embolden us to bridge the gap between people of different races and religions; nudge us to visit someone who is lonely, weep with a friend who is grieving, and celebrate with someone who has reason to shout.

Generous God, we pray that this Christmas will saturate us with peace, arouse new hopes, inject us with joy, and drench us with love. Now hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying, "Our Father..."