

Sermon – Matthew 1:18-25; Isaiah 7:10-16

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4 Advent – Year A

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“Signs of the Season”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It was a bit later than usual this year, but we finally found the sign for the season. And it was about time; other signs had been popping up around us for weeks. Light displays, sugar cookies, a new Star Wars movie – all signs that December was flying past once more and that Christmas was coming soon. We, however, had not managed to get around to it. This party, that child’s illness; so many things had been getting in our way. But on Friday, we finally went out to procure that most important sign of the season: the Lyle family Christmas tree. So, as has now become our tradition – we’ve done it *every* year we’ve lived here – we loaded the kids into the two-wheel drive open sleigh and headed out to pick out our Christmas tree in the parking lot of the local Mexican restaurant. A funny thing happens when you wait until the third week of December to pick out your tree: you don’t have many options left. We got to the lot and discovered that our options were slightly less than plentiful. After looking at the trees, we asked the purveyor of yuletide evergreens if he had any seven-footers left. We found ourselves with basically one option, which, blessedly, was quite beautiful. What had in years past been a family conundrum, a careful choosing between different types, colorations, fullnesses, and prices was pretty much boiled down to a choice between yes or no. We were either going to get this tree or we weren’t. We said yes and, finally, our home looks like Christmastime is here. So often when picking out the family tree, we look for a sign. Is this the tree we’re

- looking for? This year, the tree itself was a sign, and we could take it or leave it. We took it. Given the choice, it was really no choice at all. We needed a tree.
2. How often do you find yourself looking for a sign? In the midst of a difficult career decision or a serious illness, a choice of college for a child or a nursing facility for a parent, we look for signs. In the midst of hidden hopelessness or anxiety, we plead for a sign. Just show us, God, the right way to go, the right thing to do, and we'll follow your lead. I can't help but wonder, however, if our searching for signs is little more than pious procrastination, a desire for more open-endedness when God has already made a path clear, or has at least boiled it down to yes or no. Where we search for a sign to help us choose among many paths, God's options for us are often binary decisions, yes or no. We see such events in our scripture readings today.
 3. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, we are shown a scene of political challenge amidst the fear of warfare and the threat of violence. King Ahaz of Judah is beset by enemies, threatened by the massed forces of the Aram and the northern Kingdom of Israel. He is out of options, knowing that he doesn't have the military might or the diplomatic maneuvers to avoid being overrun by superior strength. But God has not forsaken the people of Judah, offering Ahaz the opportunity to ask for a sign of promise. Ahaz turns God down, believing that nothing can save God's people at this point in time. Ahaz is out of options, but God is not. Rather than showing Ahaz a vision of victorious regiments, God gives the king a most unlikely sign, that of a child who, by the time he is old enough to eat solid food, will demonstrate the very presence of God, whose presence will signify salvation for God's people. Had Ahaz had any other choices left to him, he surely would have gone in another direction. But Ahaz, and all of God's people, were out of options. This was God's offer, take it or leave it. With nowhere left to go but to God and God's odd sign of a young child, the Kingdom of Judah was spared from certain destruction.

4. This memory of a little child signaling salvation, demonstrating the promise of Immanuel, of God-with-us, would linger in the collective memory of God's people over the coming centuries. Even so, it seems, nothing could have prepared Joseph for his fateful choice, or lack thereof, some seven hundred years later. The kingdoms of old had long since been overrun, lost, regained, and then conquered once more. God's people were in desperate straits. But all such military and geopolitical circumstances must have been lost upon poor Joseph when his time of choosing came upon him. Joseph, as you know, was engaged to be married. Of course, engagement – or betrothal – was a different matter in that time and place. While romantic love and choice may have been involved, engagement was much more a legal contract. Joseph and Mary were already bound together in every way save consummation and cohabitation. And yet, to Joseph's surprise, considering the lack of consummation or cohabitation, Mary was pregnant. Joseph had a choice, and it was down to yes or no. Either he could stick by Mary's side or he could walk away. He was resolved to the latter option, although he had no desire to invoke the more violent options available to him. He didn't want to shame or punish Mary, but he was done with her. And then, a sign; a voice from an angel of the Lord, reframing his choice with the overpowering will of God's choice for him, for Mary, for this whole world. The option of marrying Mary and becoming foster-father to this baby was not one choice among many, and a poor choice at that; it was instead God's definitive decision for the salvation of God's people and the good of Joseph's line, the royal lineage of the House of David through whom God would save God's people. Joseph was out of options. It was down to yes or no. Yes or no to Mary. Yes or no to this child of promise. Yes or no to God's plan for the world. Joseph said yes. What else could he have done?
5. While we are right to laud Joseph's choice, his openness to God's will, we also must see that there was really no choice at all, just as there was no real

choice for Mary. Joseph and Mary, like Ahaz and Isaiah before them, did not have the luxury of plentiful choices. Faced with fear and scandal, doubt and derision, they had only one place left to go: God, and God's unending, undeniable, promises for them. And how often this is true for us as well! While we are deluded by the promise of choice, the plenteous options before us, when push comes to shove we find ourselves crying out, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" And there is only one answer: the same Lord to whom we address the question is the One who is the question's answer. For the victims of injustice and oppression; for the scandalized like Joseph and the fearful like Mary; for the children of this world from Chicago to Aleppo; for all who no longer have the luxury of choice, there is a Word of promise being birthed among them bearing the very promise of God, for the little child is himself God. This child named Jesus, the One who will save his people. This child named Immanuel, who is the very God of heaven and earth dwelling with us. This child a sign for us; and not simply a sign, but the thing itself: salvation, hope, direction, forgiveness, and life. In short, God – here and now.

6. And so we, like Joseph, are given a choice. Will we foster and care for the promise of God that lives in this child Jesus, or will we not? More importantly, is it even a choice? As for God's people before us, the enemy is at the gates. Sin, death, and the devil howl and prowl, nipping at our heels. We are out of options, but God is not. We have no choice, but God does. Creation stands at its tipping point. And God has chosen, chosen to wrap the majesty and might of the godhead up in the fragile flesh of a baby named Jesus. He's the only One left on the lot. It's time to take him home and watch God plant him in our hearts, watching life and love bloom in our midst, right where God has chosen to dwell. With us. With all people. Forever. Given the choice, I'm not sure we'd choose a newborn baby, much less a crucified carpenter's Son, as our best option, but there you have it. Thank God he's chosen us. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.