

4th Sunday of Advent

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

December 18, 2022

" Ask for a **sign** from the LORD, your God; let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky!"

When God sent Isaiah to Ahaz, as we heard in the first reading today, we heard the King of Judah refuse to ask for a sign from God, as Isaiah instructed him. Ahaz's refusal, at first glance, may appear to be due to humility before God. On the contrary, it's more likely that this refusal to ask for a sign demonstrated Ahaz's lack of faith in God and the signs and wonders that God had done for His people through His many prophets in ages past. Ahaz felt that he had no need of God's signs, protection or providence and that he, Ahaz, could do everything by himself; despite the rising threat facing his kingdom of Judah. It was surrounded on all sides by its many enemies, and was threatened by the rising might of Assyria which was also threatening the kingdoms of Syria and Israel to the north.

God then declared his weariness of Ahaz's behavior and proclaimed through Isaiah what He would nonetheless do—to show us all, the whole world, of His love for each one of us: That He would send unto us through the house of David, His love manifest through His Son, the divine Word of God incarnate, Emmanuel, "God is with us."

Contrast Ahaz's refusal to heed God's call for a sign with the central role that Mary and Joseph play in God's plan of salvation for us. Beginning with Mary's response to the angel Gabriel, "May it be done to me according to your word," and continuing, in today's Gospel, with Joseph's response to the sign delivered by the angel of the Lord who appeared to him in a dream. God teaches us that He is active in our history and lives and that He comes to us through human instruments who respond to His signs.

Our lives are full of signs:

- When the robin returns, spring is close at hand,
- The Sign of the Cross, a sacramental, which invites us to reverence during acts of worship, and
- Our Cathedral Advent Wreaths with the thematic ribbons calling us to Hope, Faith, Joy and Peace this Advent season.

We, through our baptism, are called to respond to God's signs and cooperate with God, just as Mary and Joseph did. We're called to be a missionary church: Whether it is to respond to the cry of the poor, the oppressed, the homeless, single mothers or to love our enemies, we are called to be the sign that God is with us.

On our recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Mary and I saw and experienced many signs when we visited and prayed at the numerous holy sites that are mentioned in the Gospels:

- The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem,
- Mount Tabor, the site of the Transfiguration, and
- The Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the site of Jesus' crucifixion, tomb and Resurrection, to name but a few.

We came to realize that signs, "manifestations of the sacred," are all around us. As Tom Turner, the MGM Education Minister wrote in his weekly email yesterday, the signs in our lives "may be something small and subtle, or large and obvious." Unlike Ahaz, we need to "ask for [a sign] and then, look for it."