

This season of the Church, between Epiphany and Lent,
is the season of signs.

Every Sunday between Epiphany and Lent
almost every reading is a story about God's presence in the world.

God leads the magi with a star to the messiah, to the Christ-child.
Both the star and the child are signs of God's presence.

Then the baptism of Jesus, that moment when the heavens tear open
and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus
and the voice of his Father comes from heaven:
"This is my Son, my beloved."

Not all the signs are miraculous.

We do get Jesus turning water into wine, his first miracle,
but we also get Jesus walking around and calling his disciples.

We get Jesus healing the sick and casting out demons,
but we also get Jesus unrolling the scroll of Isaiah
to begin his earthly ministry,
and we get the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount.

All of these - the miracles, the gathering, and the wisdom -
all are signs of God's presence, and then,
on the last Sunday before Lent,
we get the unmistakable sign of Jesus' transfiguration
on the mountain.

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Epiphany is also when we look for signs of God's presence
in the world today.

That was the whole point of the Epiphany service,
that just as the light of Christ shone forth from Bethlehem,
so it continues to shine through us as we go out into the world.

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I have seen signs of God's presence recently.

This week I was invited to be a witness as Khaled Ghannoum
and a whole roomful of people were sworn in as American citizens.

If you've never gotten to attend one of those services,
you really should try and do it.

Some of y'all remember Khaled and the Ghannoum family.

In 2016 we sponsored them for immigration as refugees
of the crisis in Syria.

We collected about \$10,000 for the effort and worked with
New American Pathways to sponsor them.

They were Syrian refugees living in a camp in Jordan.

7 years later they are all citizens: Khaled and Ruwaida,
Mohammad and Zainab, and the twins that arrived a few years later.

Watching Khaled wave that little American flag and take the
oath of citizenship, I couldn't help but think about their journey.

I remember Cara Hall taking a leadership role at first,
drawing on her own immigration experience.

Then she had to step back and other people stepped in.

Ed and Patty Buckley offered their garage apartment, and I remember
groups of people going over there to paint and clean and
prepare the apartment for 4 people...and then for the twins!

I remember lots of bumps in the road.
Lots of conversations and meetings and brainstorming
and venting and encouraging.

I remember hearing Khaled wondering if they had made a big mistake.
I remember some of us wondering that, too.

There were lots of other people involved, of course,
people with no connection to the church. This is not a hero story.
Lots of mixed signals every now and then.

But everyone kept at it. Ron and Cindy, Nancy and Leanne,
all sorts of folks stepping in to help them when we could,
and to just stay connected even when we couldn't.

I think what kept me optimistic was Tish Wallace telling me
about all the ups and downs that occurred
the last time we did this.

Years before Tish and a bunch of others had welcomed
a different refugee family.
Back then we even owned a house that we fixed up for them to live in.

Quite an adventure, according to Tish,
and at least as many frustrations then as this time.
But it worked out. They found their way, flourished, became citizens,
and they started a new chapter of their lives.

Watching Khaled and all those people was a sign, at least it was to me,
a sign of God's presence made manifest in people's lives,
in their new beginnings and in their joy and their flourishing.

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Another sign was at our Advent Lessons & Carols service.

The last few years we've had Patrick Barlow read the fourth lesson.

If you've attended the service you might remember Patrick.

He's a young man with Down's Syndrome and he's
a member of the L'Arche Community.

We don't do as much with L'Arche as we used to,
since Curt Armstrong moved to France
and Tim Moore started attending a Presbyterian Church,
but hopefully it'll come back around soon.

Because the L'Arche Community IS a sign of God's presence.

I know how that sounds, but it's true.

L'Arche is a manifestation, a sign,
that the Holy Spirit is still moving among us today.

See, L'Arche homes are places where people with intellectual disabilities
live together with people without those disabilities. In a 1-to-1 ratio.
The point is that they live TOGETHER.

Their mission is to make a witness to the inherent worth
and equality of all people.

They're not a hospital, or a social agency,
or something that can be replicated as a government program,
because the people who live there aren't problems to be dealt with.

L'Arche is a witness that every one of us, however we are made,
is made in the image of God and that we can live together in love.

When Patrick reads that lesson,
he is a sign to us that the presence of God is in his L'Arche home,
and so every year I look forward to seeing it.

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The other signs I've seen this year were at funerals,
the funerals of people who were right at the heart of this parish
and the funerals of people who were more loosely connected.

I won't name names because I'll leave someone out,
but in those last pastoral visits,
and in the conversations with family as we prepare for the funeral,
and in the burials I have been blessed time and again
to see the presence of the Holy Comforter.

Some of you don't know that the beautiful garden outside the Chapel
is the place where the ashes of so many of our beloved are scattered.
It's a holy place, and I hope you'll go and sit there anytime you can.

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This morning St. Paul is reminding us that the most powerful sign
of God's presence we will show anyone...is ourselves.

Paul says that as Christians, we are connected to God
in a way that no other people are.

He says that through baptism we are members of Christ's body,
and even more, that we are each temples of the Holy Spirit.

Our bodies, whatever they look like, temples of the Holy Spirit.

If Paul is right,
then the fullness of the Trinitarian God is at work in each one of us.

Each of us created in the image of God the Father.

Each of us part of the very body of God the Son.

Each of us a temple for God the Holy Spirit.

And, Paul says, because the fullness of God is at work in you
you should GLORIFY God with that temple,
with your body, with the totality of who you are.

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I want to challenge each of you - and especially myself -
to glorify God in a particular way this next year.

Today is Jan. 14.

One year and 6 days from now we will swear in a new president
of these United States.

It will likely be either Joe Biden or Donald Trump,
though at this point I'm not sure anything would surprise me.

In the next year our national anxiety is going to be
as high as it's ever been in my lifetime.

The pressure will be for each of us to do whatever it takes
to make sure our side wins,
the temptation incredibly high for you to cast aside or defeat
anybody who disagrees with you.

And why not? The stakes of this next election ARE high.

As with every national election, the outcome will have
life and death consequences for people all over the world.

But my challenge to each of you - and especially to myself -

is to REMEMBER: that however you engage with the world this year,
your first responsibility is to glorify God with your whole body.

To glorify God with your words, both in public and in private,
to glorify God with your actions,
especially towards those you see as your enemy,
and to glorify God through the thoughts you choose to indulge in,
and the ideas you choose to embrace.

It doesn't mean always being nice, or being passive.

It won't look the same for any of us.

But it might mean reading the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians
a lot more in 2024 than you did before,
and remembering Paul's warning about the danger
of acting and speaking without love, even when you're right.

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Epiphany is when we look for signs of God's presence in the world.
Never forget that the most powerful sign of God's presence
you will ever show anybody...is your own life.

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"Do you not know," Paul says,
"that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...
and that you are not therefore your own?"

"You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."

Amen