

Numbers 21:4-9
Ephesians 2:1-10
“And This Will be a Sign for You.”

Rev. David Pierce
March 11, 2018

I am too young to have been a child of the 70s. I was born in 1980. My parents, however, were children of the 70s. Just 18 when my brother was born and 20 when I came along, my childhood years were my parents' late teen years and their late teen years were my childhood years. Among the many things this meant for us as a family, it meant that in addition to listening to music from Sesame Street, I also listened to John Denver, the Rolling Stones, and The Five Man Electrical Band. Originally from Canada, The Five Man Electrical Band was a bit of a one-hit wonder with their song, "Signs, Signs, Everywhere a Sign." Released in the U.S. in 1970, the song hit the airwaves at a time when the Vietnam War and U.S. involvement in Vietnam was coming to a climactic end. Protests were a daily occurrence in Washington and soon troops would begin to return home to a country that was much divided over whether we ought to have gone to war in Vietnam in the first place. 1970 also marked the 6-year anniversary since the passing of Civil Rights Legislation. Yet no one could deny that our country was still far from decided on questions of racial equality. In less than 4 years Nixon would resign the presidency and Time Magazine would publish covers in 1970 that read: "Code Red," "How Gay is Gay?" and "The New Arms Race." And The Five Man Electrical Band provided the theme song to go with it all.

"Sign, sign, everywhere a sign
Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?"

Can't you read the sign? It's probably necessary for us to note that the question isn't, "Didn't you see the sign?" That would be a much simpler and easier question to answer. When I accidentally fly through the four-way stop, only to be suddenly pulled over by the police and asked, "Didn't you see the stop sign?" Or, when I'm driving down the highway on my way to a place I've never been before. I've been told by Moira a dozen times which exit to take, but she has fallen asleep in the passenger seat and when she wakes up she says, "Where are we? How did you not see the sign?" No, this question assumes that we see the

sign. We just don't know how to read it. Which is not to say that we don't know how to read, but that we don't know how to read the sign. We don't know what it means. Can't you read the sign?

Indeed, anyone who has ever considered a sign, whether it be a stop sign or an exit sign knows that it's not enough just to see the sign. You must also be able to read it, to know what it means. That a stop sign is for keeping us safe and an exit sign for showing us where to change course in order to get to our ultimate destination.

What strikes me as so interesting about signs, though, is not that they tell us where to go in order to get to where we want to be, but that they tell us where others have already been. Did you ever think about this particular quality of signs? I don't know why but I had never thought about this before, that signs stand in the world as a marker of where others have already been. That in order for there to be a sign somewhere, someone else had to be the first to go and put it there. The reason I never thought about this before, probably, is because whenever I'm looking for a sign it's because I don't know where I am or where I'm going. I'm lost, and being lost is an incredibly lonely experience. When we are lost, we aren't thinking about the people who have been where we are. Instead, we are thinking only about ourselves and where we are, and how we wish we were somewhere else. In such moments, we need something that we don't have. We need a way out that we ourselves can't find.

I realize that all this talk about being lost may be...lost on us, and that's because we live in a world of GPS and smart phones. We are so used to being able to find our way to everywhere now that we hardly know what it is to be lost anymore. But try finding your way out of an illness for which you've been told there is no cure. Or a toxic relationship that has gone on for so long that you can't remember when it wasn't toxic. Or an addiction that you've tried every which way to quit on, but it's always 2 steps forward, 8 steps back. Or knowing someone who's been unemployed for so long and has gone to so many interviews that they've convinced themselves it's *them*, no one wants *them*. In such moments, our strongest impulse is to want to flee, to run away from being lost. In actuality, however, maybe what we need to do is stop right where we are, check the signs and remember that someone else has been where we are.

I love to hike and often times, when I'm out on the trail, I'll come across a small stack of rocks sitting right in the middle of the path that will look like a monument or a statue. Hikers call these cairns. They're usually built up over time, as hikers come by and one at a time they add another rock to the stack. I used to think that these rock formations, these cairns, were put in place just as way of marking the trail, but this past week someone told me that their main purpose is to prevent erosion of the land. That if you look closely, you'll notice that they're built in places where the trail may be at risk of being washing away, and the cairns help to reroute rain water and to keep the trail intact. I just love that. The rocks serve as a message, a sign from one hiker to the next that says, if you're lost and feeling tired, know that someone else has already been by here, and I've placed another rock on the pile for you, to make sure the trail doesn't get away from you. Paul's word for it in writing to the church at Ephesus is grace. Grace is Paul's cairn. "For by grace you have been saved, and this is not your own doing. You couldn't have found your own way even if you wanted to. But God has come alone to put another rock on the pile for you."

I don't know but this is also what we see going on in our scripture reading from the book of Numbers. From the 21st chapter, the Israelites are out on their own hiking trail in the Negev Desert. The way has been hard going. Their feet are tired, their water supply is running low, and they don't know where they're going. They just know that they shouldn't turn back to where they came from, because that would mean going back to Egypt and a life of slavery under Pharaoh. They know that God has promised to give them all the signs they will need to get to wherever it is that God wants them to go—a land flowing with milk and honey, says God—but God has not told them how long it will take to get there, and lately the signs don't seem to come but one a week. Naturally the troops have grown impatient and cranky.

"Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?" they complain to Moses their trail guide. "For there is no food or water, and we detest the miserable food."

"Now hold on a minute," says God upon hearing their complaint. "Is it really the case that you have no food and you're going to die of starvation, or is it just that you don't like the food you have?"

I have found that when we are not where we want to be, when things are not going our way, we will exaggerate the truth to make things look worse than they really are. And so, perhaps wanting to show the Israelites that things are never what they seem, that bad food has never been the death of anyone, God sends poisonous snakes to bite them on the trail, to show them what real death looks like. And the people of course beg God for mercy. “Please, give us something that will save us,” they cry. So, God tells Moses to make a poisonous bronze snake—a fake snake—and to set it up on a pole. “Now, whenever anyone gets bitten by a real snake, have them look up at the make-believe snake,” God instructs Moses, “and they will live.” Because God wants to be absolutely clear with us that the things which we think are going to kill us are hardly ever going to kill us. Instead, what’s more likely to do us in is lack of gratitude, a complaining spirit, an inability to hope, and a refusal to love.

This past week I came across the book, “Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I’ve Loved.” It’s written by Kate Bowler. Kate is a professor at Duke Divinity School and was recently diagnosed with stage 4 terminal colon cancer. In her book, she talks about what it’s like to be living and dying at the same time.

I am afraid that I will die here, away from my home, away from that delicious feeling of being folded into something. It was a feeling that began for me at Thanksgiving years ago, when I saw that [my husband Toban’s grandmother], Grandma Penner, had put my name in blank ink on a little name card at my plate. Toban and I were only dating at the time, but there I was—written into their lives on a note card. And suddenly, the house seemed alive. I could hear the gentle ribbing of the men comparing notes on cars they had wrecked and I could see Toban’s aunts, cousins, and sisters setting down a dozen pies for us to eat later. Grandma Penner called me over and, with her wrinkled hands, showed me how to roll the [Thanksgiving] buns into thick pull-apart sheets. After we all sat down to the folding tables and sang the doxology, one of the young wives of a second cousin looked at my place card.

“Pen, huh?” she said wryly.

I smiled.

“That’s a fantastic *sign*,” she said, with a laugh. “You’re in. My grandma took one look at my brother’s girlfriend and whispered to me, “Let’s put her name down in pencil.”¹

Some 2,000 years ago, when God wanted to send the world a savior, God put a sign in the sky over Bethlehem one night for a group of shepherds to see. God wrote it in ink. The sign read, “For unto you has been born a child. You’ll find him wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger.”

“A child? Not an adult? Wrapped in cloth? Not in silk? Lying in a manger? Not sitting on a throne?” one of the shepherds asked.

“Yes, a child,” said the head angel. “Can’t you read the sign?”

And the child grew and became a preacher, and one day he preached a sermon to a crowd of people—smart people they were—and after the sermon was over they said, “Jesus, can you give us a sign from God?” And Jesus picked up a cross and started walking towards Jerusalem. And all the people said, “Jesus, where are you going? What about that sign?” And Jesus, looking at his cross, then looked back at the crowd and sighed, “What? Can you still not read?”

¹ Bowler, Kate (2018). “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved.” New York: Random House, pgs. 63-64. *Italics mine*.