

Wouldn't you like to have a sign from God sometimes? Just a little sign? It would be nice when you have a decision to make about buying a new house, when you wonder about which doctor is best for your condition, or which person to date as a steady if you are unmarried. You wouldn't ask for much of a sign, just a little one would do, to let you know that God was on your side, that he was right there with you. Surely God could send a sign.

In the years after King Solomon, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom kept the name Israel and the southern kingdom was called Judah. The king of Israel had joined forces with the king of Syria to attack Judah and its king, Ahaz. Ahaz and his people were terrified. They were so scared, the Bible tells us, that their hearts "shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind" (Isaiah 7:2). So God sent his prophet Isaiah to comfort the shaky people of Judah and their shaky king and give them hope. They were not to worry—their enemies would be destroyed. God even offered to give Ahaz a special sign to show him that the promise would be kept and the enemies would fall in defeat. But King Ahaz refused the sign. He said he didn't want to test the Lord. But God gave him the sign anyway, and it was an extraordinary sign, an unheard-of event. Isaiah told King Ahaz: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." It was the sign that Judah's enemies would be destroyed. Ahaz and his people did not need to shake with fear. The virgin-born son was the proof that God keeps his promises. He was the sign that Ahaz and his people needed: God is with us.

That's a sign that we would like to see too, even a little sign that God is with us. Sometimes our hearts too shake "as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." What makes your heart shake? We hear of wars and rumors of wars as nations threaten one another. We live in a culture that worships gods of its own choosing or entirely denies the reality of God. We may be mocked for our faith. We may be ridiculed and labeled as intolerant for trying to live according to God's Word. Believers around the world suffer imprisonment or even death for the sake of their faith. A sign that God was with us, even a little sign, would be nice. We wouldn't be like Ahaz; we would not refuse a sign of God's presence, even a little sign.

Today we are here to celebrate and sing hymns of joy because God has given us the sign we need. It is a little sign, too, just the size of a newborn infant, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger in Bethlehem. Jesus our Lord is the promised virgin-born Son. He is Immanuel, God with us, because that is exactly who he is—God in the flesh, born among us as one of us. We do not need to shake with fear, like Ahaz and his people did. Whatever the trouble, whatever fear and despair we might face, whatever sins still grieve us, we know that Jesus is our Lord Immanuel. He is God with us.

Think about this miracle: Of all the ways God could have chosen to communicate that there was a God to human beings, He chose to become one of us. Think of what He could have done. He could have written it in the sky. He could have used thunder and lightning. He could have put on a giant light show. He could have invented satellite television 2000 years earlier and put a TV in everybody's home. He could have done anything He wanted to. If you were God, would you have come as a baby? Of all the ways that God could have come

into this world, He came the same way you and I came into this world -- as a baby. Every one of us here came the same way. He came into this world and became a human being.

Why did God do that? Why did God come to earth as a baby? Because God said, "I'm sending Jesus Christ to save you, not to scare you. Nobody's afraid of a baby." Many people are honestly afraid of God. They don't even like to talk about God. They get nervous when you talk about Him. If God had come in thunder and lightning and clouds, it would have scared a lot of people to death. But nobody's afraid of a baby. God wants you to know Him. He knows all about you. He knows everything that's ever happened to you. He's watched every single moment of your life. He saw you in your mother's womb. He knew that you were going to be here tonight, a thousand years before you were born.

He knows everything that's going to happen in your future. He knows all about you. He wants you to know Him.

In Jesus, too, still another sign is raised up to give us comfort and hope. It is the sign on which our Lord himself was lifted up, the sign of the cross. Jesus was born among us to be our Savior. What do I need a Savior for? The Bible says that heaven is a perfect place. There is no sadness in heaven, no sorrow, no sin, no sickness, no problems, no pressures at all in heaven. Heaven is a place of absolute perfection. That means that only perfect people get to go to heaven. If God let imperfect people into heaven, then it wouldn't be perfect any more. It would be like earth. Our earth is obviously filled with imperfect people. You say, "If only perfect people get into heaven, then I don't stand a chance." You're right. Exactly. Neither do I. None of us stand a chance. God had to come up with a plan and that's what Christmas is all about.

God said, "None of you are perfect so I can't let you into heaven. So here's what I'll do. I will come to earth in the form of a human being and My name will be called Jesus. I will live the only perfect life that ever lived. Then I will die on the cross to pay for all the imperfections you have and then, if you will trust in Me, I will get you into heaven on My own goodness because you're not good enough." I call that a deal! I call that the greatest Christmas gift you'll ever be offered.

I received this Christmas card a while back. It says "If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need on earth had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an accountant. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior."

There's only one problem with a Savior. You can only have a Savior if you recognize your need for one. It reminds me of the work of lifeguard. When someone's drowning, they swim out to them but they won't grab them immediately because, if they're drowning, they're flailing around trying to save themselves and if a lifeguard tries to grab them at that point, he'll be pulled under with them. They're frustrated trying to save themselves. A lifeguard will swim out to the person, tread water, until that person just finally gives up. When they go under a couple of times and you feel like they're through, it's real simple. You just put an

arm over their shoulder and swim to shore. The point is this: Jesus Christ can't rescue you until you stop trying to save yourself. This is a gift. You'll never earn it. You'll never deserve it.

By God's grace, through faith in Jesus' name, we have forgiveness and eternal life. In our decisions, whatever they may be, we know that our Lord Immanuel, God with us, is present as he promised to be. In a dark and sin-filled world, a world that often makes our hearts shake with fear, Jesus is with us. He is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness can never overcome his light. He is the virgin-born Son, the sign, Immanuel, God with us.

Do you want to see a sign from God, just a little sign? Come and by faith look into the manger. The Child of Bethlehem is the sign we need. Amen.