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Signs

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In our family, we have traditionally been the relatives that travel home. We have always tended to live several hours away from the family core, and so rather than host Thanksgiving or Christmas, we would travel back home – in our case to Northeastern Ohio. When we lived in Rochester, New York, we made the arduous trek through Erie in December – for which we should get some sort of family medal. When we lived in Baltimore MD, the six hour trip home was often 12 hours because of the curse of the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

And as any of you know when you are traveling with young children and the road is long and boring, you search for those signs that will help them to know that the journey is nearly over.

Are we there yet?

“No, but look! It's the Sapp Brothers Coffee Pot. That means we're near Clearfield, just one more hour to go,” And there it would be, rising up out of the Central Pennsylvania mountains, a sign that we were completing the holiday trip from Ohio back to our home in State College. Apparently that coffee pot is a landmark that can be found from Omaha to Pennsylvania. It will lead you to a truck stop. I appreciated it more as a sign that better coffee lay ahead if we were just patient. Regardless, it was a sign of hope on a long car trip.

Signs are essential to the upkeep of hope – especially in the long journey we're on with God. That's because a big part of the life of faith is waiting – waiting for delivery from exile, waiting for an end to oppression and injustice, waiting for the Messiah to arrive, waiting for Christ to return.

Today's Scriptures are a good example – they are filled with longing.

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah,” promises Jeremiah.

“Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith,” writes Paul to the dear Thessalonian community, one of the first communities he founded.

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near,” Luke's Gospel quotes Jesus as saying, after enumerating the various things that will happen before God's glory is fully revealed.

Advent is a season that relishes waiting – waiting for a coming Christmas that we know has already arrived. Waiting for the second coming of which we know not the time or the place.

In the face of longing and waiting, God sends signs. Burning Bushes. Twelve plagues. Oil that does not run out. Transfigurations. The Scriptures offer prophetic performances and veiled apocalyptic imagery like we have in today's Gospel from Luke.

People of faith are notorious for misreading them. God's signs are characteristically inexplicable in their timing. When made into predictions, they invariably let us down.

There is an art to reading signs.

When my husband Jess and I met in college and began to spend lots of time together, we often found ourselves looking for some place to eat together. We'd leave a class wondering which of the half dozen dining establishments in Kent, Ohio, we should choose. Let's follow the signs, Jess would say. A fallen branch on the sidewalk would suggest we go left. A crumpled piece of notebook paper sent us forward. A shadow pointing a certain way would steer us in another direction.

Inevitably we'd end up at Wendy's. I would not say that this was God's will. Divine signs don't work like that.

Now the Apostle Paul, on the other hand, was very good at reading God's signs. I think he saw them everywhere, especially in the communities of faith that he helped found. Listen to his delight in the Thessalonian community that he is separated from and longing for:

"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?" Paul tells them.

They are the sign that Paul turns to in order to endure the long slog of his work as an apostle. They give him hope that the Body of Christ is in action in real time. The Thessalonians are not perfect – he knows that their faith is lacking in places. But that doesn't limit his joy. They are enough for him, because they speak to the presence of Christ among the faithful, even as they await Jesus' coming in glory.

Here is the true power of God's signs, of Christ's promises. They answer our most persistent questions, though not the ones we usually find ourselves asking. More often than not, we cry out with the psalmist, "How long O Lord?" And we think we want a day and time for an answer.

But the questions that God answers are: Are you still with us, Lord? Will everything be OK?"

And the signs say: "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

The Kingdom of God is at hand. Redemption is drawing near. God is with us. This is what God's signs reveal as we journey from the now of God's will to the not yet of God's promises.

Because God knows that it hardly helps us to know how much time it will take before our longing ends, when it's the present moment that feels like an eternity and seems so hard to endure. Often when things are very near their completion, time seems to slow down to a standstill. I remember that from when I was giving birth to my children; that final week everything slowed and the imminent seemed like it would never happen. Waiting for news – good or bad – can feel like this. Keeping vigil at a death is like this, as well.

And then in an instant everything changes, and the end begins.

So we really can't trust our sense of time, and the impatience we find ourselves in because of it. But we can acknowledge our longing for the fullness of God's love to be revealed, for the return of Christ in glory, for the new world coming. And at the same time, we can relish the evidence of it along the way.

And very often it is not in the earthquakes or the roaring seas that God's presence is signified, as much as it's in communities of faith, like Paul's dear Thessalonians or our faith community here at St Peter's. God's signs abound here. Quotidian but astonishing to me all the same – the compassionate listening, the waiting by the bedside, the checking in on one another, the desire to stay at the table with one another when our views diverge, the willingness to try something new. These too are God's signs. They answer the questions: Are you still with us Lord? Will everything be OK?

And in these signs God answers: I am here. I am with you. And all will be well. Amen.