

Sermon for Sunday, December 2, 2012 Jeremiah 33:14-16/Luke 21:35-36 "First Trimester"

"There's something different about Casey," Doug said one evening as we had dinner. "I don't know what it is, but there's something different."

I wondered what it was he was seeing in his colleague and friend. "Is she happy? Is she unhappy? Is she sick, do you think?"

"No, no, it isn't like that...it just seems like she's super-healthy and happy...she's just sort of glowing."

"Ah," I said. "I know what it is. I know those signs."

Signs and wonders....things that give us clues to what is to come. Sometimes God gives us a hint of what is to come. Are there any more welcome signs that spring is coming than the blossoming of crocuses in late February or early March? Isn't it as clear as the spoken words when your doctor looks at you with grave eyes before he tells you the test results? Don't we know when snow is coming by the steel gray clouds in the sky and the odd smell in the air?

What Doug sensed without knowing, of course, was that his colleague was expecting a child. Casey had that famous "glow of pregnancy" that we hear about in all the "What To Expect When You're Expecting" books. She had not yet told anyone the good news, but those who worked with her noticed that something was different. And when she finally announced it in a staff meeting a few weeks later, everyone smiled and thought, "Ah, so THAT's what that was about!" They had seen the signs, and even if they weren't quite sure what they portended, they had enough clues to make a good guess.

We are remarkably skilled in the process of looking for signs before we know all the details of what is to come, of course. High schoolers waiting for their letters of acceptance or rejection from the colleges to which they applied know that a fat envelope is good news and a thin one is not. Parents who know their child is bringing home her report card can tell by the way the child delivers the envelope what the grades will look like. The best poker players know how to read "tells" or little physical signs that give them a clue as to the hand of cards the person sitting across the table might have.

So, too, it is in this time of Advent, the time of signs and wonders. Signs and wonders are there for us to observe when something new is going to happen, says Luke in today's gospel. He refers, of course, not to the forthcoming newborn infant Jesus, the focus of our attention in these next few weeks, but of another coming of Jesus, the one that signals the end of the age. But his words still resonate for us as we enter into this season of Advent. Mary is pregnant. No one else may yet know – only she and the angel Gabriel are aware – but there is something different about her. Her mother might wonder why Mary is acting differently, looking off into space instead of paying attention to her chores. Her father may think she is growing up into a woman – she looks more womanly than she had just a week ago, somehow. There are signs.

The fig tree is leafing out, and the beginnings of flower buds that will eventually yield sweet fruit are already visible. The signs are there, even if the fruit is just a promise. What will happen through Mary – what Jeremiah prophesied, that fulfillment of the promise of God, the branch out of the rootstock of Jesse, that rootstock that yielded King David – is not yet obvious. Mary's belly is still flat. But somehow, those near her sense something different. She is glowing. She is changing. Something is happening, and although her family and friends may not understand quite what is going on, they can tell that there is an energy, a change, a sense of hopeful possibility in the air.

That's the key to that first trimester of pregnancy, isn't it? It's a time of signs and wonders. I was talking to someone the other day who is expecting her first child, and she talked about first hearing the heartbeat in the doctor's office, and how suddenly the child within her became a reality with that swish and lub-dub sound amplified in the room. The sonogram – now they're in 3-D with remarkable details – showed her baby with his thumb in his mouth. Signs and wonders...a clue to what is to come. But even when the child is so small that he is no bigger than a peanut, even when the mother's tummy is still tight and flat, even when no one else knows, there are signs and wonders. There is a glow, or just the hint that the mother-to-be is preoccupied with something out of the ordinary. There are more visible emotions, or even the less welcome sign of feeling queasy too often. There is the insistence that this particular house project needs to be completed now, not later. There is an undercurrent, a thrum of excitement, that is palpable, even if we don't know what we are excited about.

In this first Sunday of Advent, we are living in the time of signs and wonders. We, sitting here in Richmond in 2012, know how the story goes. We know that the signs and wonders that Jeremiah talked about portend the arrival in the near future of the blessed baby, the infant Jesus Christ, our Messiah and Savior.

But what we don't know is how, when we remember Christ's birth on December 25th, that miraculous birth will affect us. How will our lives be changed in the year to come by Christ's presence in our lives? What do the signs and wonders mean as we seek to love and serve the Lord? What surprises does God have in store for us, and how will we live into those surprises?

We are in the first trimester of understanding what our relationship with God will be in the coming year. We see the signs. We feel the anticipation. We sense that there will be interesting things happening. But we do not yet know the whole story of what will be. God speaks afresh to us, and the story is renewed with each Christmas birthday and each gift of wise men and each new dawn. So pay attention to those signs and wonders around you. You may not completely understand what they mean now...but you will soon. May God's Advent promise, full of hope and mysterious anticipation, light you up like a candle, or like an expectant mother...

Amen.