Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski
4th Sunday of Advent - December 21, 2025

Sign, sign, everywhere, a sign
Blockin' out the scenery
Breakin' my mind
"Do this," "Don't do that"
Can't you read the sign?

While these lyrics from a 1970s song bemoan the presence along our highways of signs, in this case billboards, that obscure the view of the natural scenery, the truth is that we need signs to tell us where we're going, where we should go—or else we can become lost. Today's readings offer a stark contrast on reactions to signs, signs from God.

In the first reading, King Ahaz, the twelfth king in the line of King David, refuses to trust in God rather than foreign allies; he turns down Isaiah's call to request a sign from God. God then voices his weariness of Ahaz's behavior and proclaims through Isaiah what He will nonetheless do—to show us all, the whole world, of His love for each one of us: He will send unto us through the house of David, His love; manifest through His Son, the divine Word of God incarnate, Emmanuel, "God is with us."

Ahaz's refusal to heed God's counsel through Isaiah is eventually disastrous for the southern Kingdom of Judah. Ahaz's alliance with the Assyrians subjects Judah to dominion under the Assyrians and he yields to the Assyrians in religion as well as in politics. The result of his rule over Judah is an abomination in the eyes of God. Ahaz pays no attention to the signs.

Contrast Ahaz's refusal to heed God's call for a sign with the central role that Mary and Joseph play in God's plan of salvation for us. Beginning with Mary's response to the angel Gabriel, "May it be done to me according to your word," and continuing, in today's Gospel, with Joseph's loving response to the sign delivered by the angel of the Lord who appeared to him in a dream; God teaches us that He is active in our lives and that He comes to us through his signs and through people who respond to His signs.

So, in these few days that remain before Christmas, the Nativity of Jesus, imagine yourself on the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, just as Mary and Joseph were **at this very time** two thousand years ago. Picture Mary, in joyful prayer yet in discomfort and exhausted with the birth of "Emmanuel" just days away. Also, picture Joseph—tender, attentive and protective. Given the circumstances, I expect that they stopped often and yet, when they arrived in Bethlehem, they found no rest—only closed doors. However, since their hearts were open to God's signs, they didn't become discouraged. Their confidence in God's promise remained unshaken.

Like Mary and Joseph we need to respond positively to the signs, "manifestations of the sacred," that are all around us; those signs "may be something small and subtle, or large and obvious." Be alert for God's presence in the ordinary, in dreams, and in quiet moments, recognizing that he is with us, not distant. Just like the Holy Family on the road to Bethlehem, we need to have faith and trust the Lord, for he keeps his promises, even when human leaders—like Ahaz—falter.