

Today we're hearing about signs and portents again- this time in the sun and the moon and the stars. These will be signs of the coming of the Kingdom. Christ is near.

As if incessant signs weren't everywhere: 24/7 Christmas carols, aisles and aisles of lights, glitter and Santa's, commercials telling us what stuff we "need" to buy for this celebration of Christ... Even my magazines get into the act-- telling me 36 ways to make a great "tablescape". You know, I never even knew that was a real word. It guess it means "how we set our table." Who knew?

This time of year is very distracting. For one thing: it's busy. For another: it's busy.

With all the advertising of Christmas everywhere, are there any real signs that God is in our midst?

A couple of years ago at the Wednesday night service at my former church - -I gave the congregation the opportunity to say what they were thankful for, since it was the day before Thanksgiving. Because it was a church service, and I was standing there in front of them as a priest--here's what I heard:

- I'm thankful for my family and friends.
- I'm thankful for my church.
- I'm thankful for the faith that helps me get through all things.

You know? It's kind of like at children's chapel when I hold up a picture of an elephant and ask them what it is, and inevitably some child pipes up, "It's Jesus!"

So, back to that Wednesday service, I tried to steer the thanksgivings into a more earthy mode: I said I was thankful for warm gingerbread just out of the oven.

And the congregation looked at me as if I were crazy.

So I said, "All right. I'm also very thankful for my daughter."

That seemed to make them happier. But I couldn't let them off the hook.

"So--" I asked them-- "what are the little things in life that you're thankful for-- not the big things like faith and hope-- but some of the tiny things?"

About this time I could tell this was going to be a struggle. You see, people are used to thinking about lofty things while they're in church-- which is good-- but they aren't used to thinking that the things in their everyday lives are lofty things.

So I tried again: "I'm thankful for public libraries, because I could never afford to buy all the worlds I want to experience and stories I want to read without them."

I can't even begin to describe the look that crossed their faces.

"OK," I said, "you're turn."

"I'm grateful for the care my parish showed me when my spouse was sick."

"I'm grateful to be in a place where I experience God every week."

And then they looked at me. After all, THIS is what Thanksgivings were supposed to look like -- especially in a church. And their look said that I should know that. Me, a priest.

"These are all good things," I assured them. "Wonderful things. But what are some everyday things you are thankful for. Things that happen to you and make you just sigh with pleasure at life. Things that make you say, 'God, that was lovely. Thank you.'"

You could see the wheels turning, but you could tell that this homily was not going in the way that they expected.

"OK," I continued, "I am thankful for the beauty of the gigantic moon that shone last night through the bare branches of the tree and lit up the leaves in my backyard." I looked at them. Did you see it?

And suddenly they were talking about the moon, it's size and color-- then one of the people shared how the night before he had seen it reflected off the river and it almost made it seem as if there was a pathway made of light that he could walk on directly to God. He said he had to pull over to the side of the road because he was so overcome by the beauty.

We paused a minute and I quietly said that I was thankful for my dad playing the guitar with us kids when I was no more than 5 or 6-- teaching us really old songs from a book called "*Songs to Grow On*": one about a fox on a starry night, one called "*Go Tell Aunt Rhodie*". I remember being in my footed pajamas and loving the sound of his voice and being happy that we were getting to spend some time with him.

Everyone was quiet.

You see --these are signs. These are signs that show us how near God is to us ALWAYS, in the little things: the warm bread, and the snuggles on the couch, the sound of the wind blowing the leaves. These signs are just as important as the end-time signs. These little, profound things jog us back to the present when we spend too much time in our heads, in our plans, in our worries.

When the world is too busy, watch for the little things. They're all around you.

One of those parishioners emailed me later that Wednesday night. She said, " thanks so much for the homily. It reminded me how important the little gifts from God are, too. I stopped at Kroger on the way home and paused to give thanks for the smell of Christmas trees lining the entrance. A little thing, yes, but it was ... an expression of God's love."

Watch for the signs that God is near this Advent. They may not be as dramatic as Luke's little apocalypse, but watch for them. Savor them. They're all around you.

Amen.