

Advent 2025

Dear family and friends,

“Scandals and Signs” is a working title for my anticipated sermon on the last Sunday of the year based on Matthew 1-2. Amidst a genealogy, an angel and dreams, the visit of the wise men, and a narrow escape from a king’s cruelty, the Gospel writer himself summarizes the significance of the events by referring to the sign of the prophet, Isaiah:

²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” Matthew 1:22-23 (NRSVue)

The amazing sign, Emmanuel, amidst the scandals of Jesus’s background and early years is surely a prophecy of hope. It is still the basis of hope and foundation of our faith some 2000 years later amidst the troubling scandals of violence and war, injustice and corruption, nationalism and imperialism of our own time. How do we sort it out? Someone pointed out that the religious leaders wouldn’t travel the 10 km to Bethlehem, but the foreigners from Persia not only came from afar but brought gifts fit for a king.



2025 has been a year to remind us to follow the signs that God sends. Often, the signs are mundane and little recognized. We have something of a daily routine in our home in the Homewood Oaks area in Loyalsock Township just east of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Several blocks northeast, Twila’s sister, Linda, and husband, Phil Byler, have made their home for over a year now, but spend considerable time each week in our home, bringing us wonderful gifts of support and encouragement. We all attend Agape Fellowship on Sundays and are separately involved in church and community activities. We also enjoy the gentle presence of our 6-year-old Welsh Corgi named “Flower.”



In the midst of these signs are meaningful relationships. Meals prepared and eaten together are at the weekly core of our relationship with Phil and Linda. They also have made possible other meaningful relationships with family and friends at home and away. Some of those are trips to Lancaster to see Twila’s relatives there, including one remaining aunt who is inching toward the century mark. Other trips are for weddings and funerals. In April, I was privileged to join Twila in walking her daughter, April, down the aisle and then lead the wedding ceremony as pastor. In May, we piggy-backed on a Byler trip to Ohio to see my sister and family in Indiana, as well as my children who came to see us. In June, one of Twila’s granddaughters came to visit us and learn about her Williamsport heritage. An unexpected memorial service in

August took us back to Lancaster. Visits from more relatives included us in late summer into the fall. At Thanksgiving, with no family coming, we found persons in the church and community who shared in a wonderful meal together in our brightly lit basement.

Perhaps the most meaningful trip for the four of us was to the Hocking Hills region of Ohio where Twila and I spent most of our wedding trip 17 years ago. Interacting with hummingbirds and butterflies and viewing some of the most amazing sunset scenes were the highlights. Interaction with more flying creatures became available closer to home, from butterflies in Hershey to “budgies” (colorful parakeets) at a small zoo just south of us. Little of that would have been possible by ourselves, so we are indeed

blessed to have Phil and Linda nearby. **This is a reminder of Emmanuel: God with us.**



Other reminders come as we deal with the health challenges, thankfully, small or gradual, but still significant reminders of our age. I continue fairly stable with my heart issues, but between other minor procedures and discovering my loss of bone density, I seem to acquire plenty of medical tests and doctor appointments. Twila retains a largely cheerful disposition while dealing with more routine tasks that are increasingly difficult to accomplish. She continues, however, to sew simple items to bless family and friends.

Then, of course, there are the larger events in our country and the world which bring us grief as we think about the suffering of war and violence, of abuse and injustice, of the innumerable scandals, each one of which has its victims, beautiful people loved by our Lord Jesus.

In the New Testament, the word from which we get our English word, “scandal” means a trap or stumbling block. What will we do with the various stumbling blocks that come our way? Can a stumbling block also be a sign? Matthew reminds us of the scandal of a virgin being with child. It is the sign that still guides our lives. **“And they shall name him Emmanuel, God with us.”**

May you also experience God’s presence in the scandals and signs throughout this season and on into 2026!

Paul Twila