

# Sermon Starter – Imagination, Signs, and Mysteries

*Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25*

“A sign is something that differs from the normal way things happen, that is outside the natural manner. A sign is so unusual and unexpected that someone who sees it or hears of it sees that it is out of the ordinary. It is called a ‘sign’ because it is significant.”

—John Chrysostom (347-40, Ancient Christian  
Commentary on Scripture. Vol X Isaiah 1–39, p. 64)

Christopher Hitchens, in writing his critique of religion and defense of atheism, concludes that “Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important” (God Is Not Great: How religion poisons everything, 2007, p. 282). Hitchens argues that the only signs we need to look for are those found in the material world and explicable through reason.

Unfortunately, this brand of “debate” between science and religion, fact and revelation, faith and reason portrays the discourse as an either/or dichotomy, oversimplifying complex issues and leaving us with answers that do not satisfy. Yet the truth is that science and faith have something significant in common: their shared passion for mystery. Both religion and science seek to open up Mystery, understand it, know it, and in some form integrate it into the meaning of our lives. And both science and religion must at some point make a leap of the imagination to connect Mystery either to reason or to faith.

Imagination in the hands of science opens up new avenues of knowledge.  $E=mc^2$  is more than a beautiful equation; it was an imaginative leap on Einstein’s part. Imagination in the hands of religion opens up new avenues of hope. “Immanuel, God with us” is more than a neatly packaged theological insight; it is an imaginative leap on the part of humanity and God both. Whenever imagination opens up new and beautiful vistas of what it means to be human, be it through science or religion, no justification is required; and that is where Christopher Hitchens’ argument falls short.

From a religious perspective, imagination is a sacred thing—it opens us up to see the sign of God’s advent in our midst. Where is your imagination being stretched this Advent to see the sign?

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