

***Scolopax & Signs***  
First UMC of Pocatello  
February 13, 2022

John 20:30-31

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Out East, when I first became interested in birding, Horton Grove Nature Preserve, with its trails and trees and wildflowers and bramble, was where I loved to go best. The land was reclaimed plantation land, the trails named after the descendants of African American slaves. I could walk through forests of oak and dogwood and find wrens, hermit thrushes, and tanagers; through restored native grassland managed with controlled burnings and find bluebirds, common yellowthroats, and the elusive chat; even through a rare old stand of longleaf pine where the red-headed woodpeckers lived.

One of my favorite things about bird watching is that, over time, you come to know the species that you're most likely to hear and see at any given time of year, which means that you're also able to notice unexpected appearances. In this particular place with its ambivalent history, such appearances often felt like visitations fraught with meaning.

On March 20 of 2020, I was walking a trail with our dog when she stopped for a long while to sniff the ground. I scanned the area around us. A lumpy shape resting on a fallen tree about twenty feet away caught my eye. I lifted up my binoculars for a better look, and what I saw took my breath away. It was an American Woodcock, scientific name *scolopax minor*.

*Scolopax* is an eastern “shorebird” that actually lives in damp forests. We don’t get them this far West, but perhaps you’ve seen close relatives like the sandpipers and curlews. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology describes them as “bulbous,” which based on what I saw is accurate. They’re body-heavy birds shaped like teetering pears with short legs, small heads, and extremely long bills that they use to plumb the topsoil for worms.

They’re difficult to find because they live so low to the ground, move slowly, and wear the colors of the forest floor, a cloak of browns, grays, oranges, and flecks of white. Their eyes appear to be on the wrong side of their heads, set so far back on the skull that *scolopax* can keep watch for predators even when digging in the ground for food.

Up to that point, I had only ever read about woodcocks in the writings of Aldo Leopold, an early conservationist from the Midwest who described the beautiful courtship display that a male *scolopax* will perform in springtime at dawn and dusk, flying high up into the air and, with a series of *buzzes* and *peents*, tumbling down to earth again – and this over and over. Ever since reading those passages, *scolopax* had occupied something of a mythical position in my imagination.

They are secretive birds that dance in dim light.

I never thought I’d see one in the bright middle of the day.

My pausing to watch alarmed him. He plopped down from his log onto the ground and began to waddle away at such an angle that I could see one of his deep, black, bottomless eyes watching me from the near-back of his head. Watching not with scorn nor with fear – but with a kind of cautious vigilance.

I knew in that moment, which turned out to be a hinge for so many things, that he had come to me out of my future to issue a warning.

At that time in my life, the world was on the brink of crisis and God had filled my heart with a restless discontent. I had been pastoring in the rural South for nearly four years, repeatedly subjected to experiences like the one I had had in worship not long before this when, after taking a woman's hand during the passing of the peace and saying to her, "The peace of Christ," she had curled her mouth and hissed back, "You're gonna need it." This was often the sort of response I got when I preached the Gospel.

As I watched that bird very slowly disappear, looking into its guarded eye and seeing the awkward comportment of its body, I saw a version of my future self. *For who but a pastor would lumber along with such a mighty mouth offset by such wary eyes?*

"You can keep doing it," I almost heard him say. "You can press on and learn how to wear the colors of this place. You'll keep plunging your mouth into the depths of things. You may even dance before God. But it'll be a secret dance in the faint light on the edges of the day. And you will have these eyes, eyes held forever above the ground keeping eternal watch."

And then he was gone.

I was deeply unsettled.

*That is not enough for me.* That's what my aching heart began crying out in response to my visitor. *That is not enough for me.* And though I would not do it fully for another nine months, it was then that I knew with a half-conscious yet certain knowing that I would quit the job

that was keeping me from living joyfully in Christ. That I would turn toward God once again, broken and uncertain, yes, but freer than I'd been before.

I would walk on.

I walked on – and though it may sound strange, I will forever say that *scolopax* was given to me as a sign.

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A sign.

Like white words on green rectangles thrust up along the highway, a sign points beyond itself to something else. It shows you the way.

Like the kiss of Judas that identified Jesus to the soldiers, a sign is an event that leads to a certain perception. “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him” (Matt. 26:48).

Like the shape-shifting rod in Moses' hands and the pollution and cleansing of his skin (Ex. 4:1-9), the signs of God are given to confirm something about who God is – present, faithful, merciful, strong to save.

For Christians, the New Testament further clarifies the purpose of signs. They come to us from within our world of flesh and gestures and birds and snakes in order to direct our attention back to Jesus Christ and his salvation, to renew our trust in his grace. One of our four gospel writers, John, calls his book a book of signs, that is, a book of Jesus' visible acts which confirm that he is loving and trustworthy.

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

I'm sure that some of the signs in John's gospel are familiar to many of you. Traditional lists usually itemize seven, including Jesus turning water to wine at the wedding in Cana; Jesus healing the royal official's son, the paralytic at the pool, the man born blind; Jesus feeding the 5,000 and then walking on water; and, finally, Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. As John tells us, there were many others.

None of these events occurred for its own sake. Instead, they provided visible, verifiable evidence that Jesus was who he said he was, who God the Father was revealing him to be – the Messiah, the Son of God. After Jesus turned the water to wine at Cana, John writes, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (2:11). The letter of 1 John, which is also attributed to John the gospel writer, begins, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1).

*Life.* That is *why* John wrote these stories down. Signs are given that we might have faith, which again, is trust, and the fruit of that trust is life. It is in John's gospel that Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Those who know Jesus as the Christ become privy to visions of his glory.

It was Bonhoeffer who said that we become Christians when we adopt the scriptures as our personal autobiography. John had something

like this in mind when he said of the signs, *these are written so that you may come to believe*. He's talking to future readers of his Gospel, those who *won't* have an opportunity to walk and talk with Jesus. John thought that the Christ-signs, once performed and written down, would forever have the power to persuade, to awaken, to woo. What I said earlier in the past tense I must now put in the present: these stories are verifiable evidence that Jesus is who he said he is, who God the Father is revealing him to be – the Messiah, the Son of God. The point is that life can be *ours* if we would but see what is already put before us.

Does God still give signs?

Just a verse before the two that we're looking at today, Jesus lightly admonishes Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). That would suggest that the written signs are enough – enough for the disciples, enough for us. The time was at hand when people would be invited to believe in Christ without that verifiable proof, to believe through word and witness and testimony. Such faith without sight would be blessed.

But then look, look, the verses immediately *after* these which seem almost conclusive open up a new chapter of the story, a whole new scene, full of mystery and epiphany: "After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias" (John 21:1). Jesus proceeds to bless the empty-handed fishermen with a heavy haul, at which point they recognize him – and return to him. That fish-laden net sure sounds like a sign to me.

If given the choice, I'd say I believed in the continuance of signs. I'll take my *Scolopax* and miracles at Sea. Ah, but this is the mystery! The signs *aren't to be believed in*. They *point to* and *gesture to*, they

*confirm* and *imply*, always something beyond themselves. We believe in *Christ*, that he has come to love us into the light and life of God...and sometimes...perhaps...for gracious and intimate and very specific reasons, God gives us a fresh flash of glory to remind us of our belief.

Many of us long for signs, but often what we mean is the event itself, not what we become responsible for in its aftermath. I had always wanted to see a woodcock, but I never thought I'd need to yield myself once again to God's grace because of one. I wonder, as you thumb through the pages of your memory, the chapters of your life, are there signs in your book? Are there moments when you have seen, touched, heard something that renewed your trust in the love of Jesus, a trust and a love that enriched your life?

There are signs, always, for all of us, in this book. There were many others, too. Which of them belong to you?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.