

GIVE HOPE TO THE HOPELESS AT CHRISTMAS

Although the landscape in my part of the world looks a bit stark at this time of year, there is one part of that barrenness which I welcome: the roadside election campaign signs are gone. Granted, they raised awareness for political candidates, and reminded us to vote as we traversed the roads in the fall. But they seemed to multiply like rabbits as Election Day drew near, so it is refreshing that they have now disappeared.

But recently, I noticed a few signs still dot the roadway, having nothing to do with politics. These signs read, "You are seen and you are loved."

Intrigued by the positive and surprising message, I took a closer look. The heading says that message is to the county youth. The reverse side bears another beautiful sentiment: "You are worth so much." Who sponsored these uplifting signs? They are simply inscribed, "Sincerely, All of Us."

I have since learned the these signs are part of a community effort to prevent teen suicide, which has increased by a staggering 60 percent since 2007, according to the Centers for Disease Control. It is vital to recognize mental health problems and to address the many pressures that can lead to suicide in people of all ages, especially in youth who are developmentally unready to handle them. So, any effort to reassure anxious and

depressed teens that they are seen, loved, and worth much is highly laudable.

There were certainly times in my teens, and beyond, when I felt unseen and unloved. Perhaps you have felt that way, too. I hope those roadside messages provide balm to aching and lonely souls.

But far more powerful than temporary road sign encouragement from sincere but anonymous "All of Us", is the imperishable reassurance we find throughout the Bible that the almighty God of universe, personified in Jesus Christ, unfailingly sees us, loves us, and bestows our worth (Genesis 1:27).

We see this in so many Bible stories, including that of Gideon. Although he was afraid and hiding from enemy marauders, God saw him and declared, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." Feeling quite the opposite of a mighty warrior, Gideon asked, "But sir, if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" (See Judges 6:1–10 for the explanation.)

Gideon's honest question voiced a common stumbling block to faith; but instead of answering him, God gave him a challenging mission, assuring him, "I will be with you." Gideon was seen and loved, and had a role to play in God's redemptive drama (Judges 6:11 ff). That is true for all of us.

And then there was Elijah, feeling afraid, alone and depressed, hiding in a cave, wanting to die. God saw him, loved him, ministered to him, called him out of his physical and

psychological cave, and directed him to a faithful community to be strengthened for his God-given purpose (1 Kings 19:1-19).

And we see it in the story of Hagar, a servant victimized by her master and mistress, who fled to the desert, pregnant and in despair. But the Lord saw her, and prophesied to her about her unborn child. He saw and loved them both. Astonished, Hagar declared, "You are the God who sees me" (Genesis 16). This gave her the strength to carry on, despite her circumstances.

As for the flip side of the road sign, "You are worth so much", consider the awesome truth captured in the words of the Christmas carol, "O Holy Night": "Long lay the world in sin and error pining, 'til He appeared, and the soul felt its worth" (see John 3:16).

This is the message that despairing youth, and all sad, lonely, discouraged and hurting people need to hear this Christmas. And not from a faceless "All of Us", but specifically, lovingly, from you and from me -- commissioned ambassadors of God's sacrificial, redeeming love (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

May God use us, at Christmastime and always, to deliver the hope-filled truth that "O Holy Night" proclaims about the exhilarating, universal significance of Jesus' birth: "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new a glorious morn!"

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux