

In Nomine Iesu

The Twenty First Sunday after Trinity 2023 Signs of God's love for us – Matthew 16:1-4

“Then the Pharisees and the Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, ‘When it is evening you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red;” and in the morning, “It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.” Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’ And He left them and departed.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Crucified, the Sign given from heaven. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ,

Signs are helpful things. Businesses use them to tell people which store is which, and what product or service each offers. Imagine going into a mall or downtown area of a large city and none of the stores had signs. How confusing it would be, and how lost and helpless you would feel. Signs help us find what we are looking for. Having done a lot of traveling lately, I can testify to the usefulness of signs, especially when we are in a place where we do not know our way around. Without signs to guide us it would be easy to become confused and lost.

I

God gives signs to guide us to the home He has prepared for us in heaven. To Noah He gave the sign of the rainbow as a reminder of His promise never again to destroy life on the earth until the Last Day. To Abraham He gave the sign of circumcision as a reminder of His promise that in Abraham's Seed all families of the earth would be blessed. To Gideon God gave the sign of a fleece wet with dew while the ground was dry, and the next morning a dry one when the ground all around was damp. When God told Israel's king to ask for a sign from Him, the king refused. So Isaiah said, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.’” These signs point us to God and His salvation.

Jesus of Nazareth is that Son born of the virgin, whom Isaiah called Immanuel, God with us. And Jesus gave many more signs, did many more miracles for the purpose of pointing us to our salvation. Now the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus asking for another sign from heaven, something Isaiah had admonished King Ahaz for **not** doing. Why did Jesus refuse their request? Because the Pharisees and Sadducees did not ask out of a weak faith, desiring to be strengthened. No, they asked for a sign out of unbelief, defiance. Not only did they not believe Jesus to be the promised Savior, they did not think that they really were lost and in need of a Savior.

Jesus knew that they didn't want Him to prove Himself to be the Savior Isaiah had set before King Ahaz. They wanted Him to fail. Even if He had given them the sign they demanded, they would have asked for yet another. So Jesus told them they could read signs already. They knew what a red sky at night meant. They knew what a red sky in the morning meant. To this day we say, “Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky in the morning, sailor take warning.” Jesus' point is simply this: as well as they knew how to read the signs in the sky, they could not read the signs He had already given them. It was not as if the signs of His being the promised Savior were not there. God had given them many signs, signs sufficient for thousands upon thousands in Israel, who recognized Jesus for the promised Savior He was. But signs could not convince

those who hated Him. There would be one last sign for them: the sign of Jonah.

Jesus had explained the sign of Jonah earlier in St. Matthew's Gospel, in chapter 12. The sign of Jonah is a valuable example of how the Holy Scriptures were written for and preserved for our learning. They show that God never forgets what He says, what He has caused His holy authors to write. We who read the Scriptures are to hear them as He gave them, believing what God says, and then expecting to witness Him make good on His promises. Matthew recorded Jesus saying: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." The crucifixion, death, and resurrection of this virgin's Son was to be the last great sign that God would give His people. They would either believe Jesus to be the promised Savior or not, solely because of His death and resurrection. He promised He would rise. They would not get another sign.

II

Some people will always find reasons to doubt God's words and signs. But God will not accommodate unbelief. We must hear and believe the truth. In this case these men from the Pharisees and from the Sadducees now stood in the presence of the God they claimed to worship, but in whom they were not willing to trust. They stood before the very sign their former king, Ahaz, in his false humility, refused to ask from God, but that God insisted on giving him for the sake of His people, whom He loved. These men now stood before the One born to the virgin God had promised through Isaiah. He was Immanuel, God with us. Jesus calls them, "Hypocrites." They claimed to be God's people. They worshiped as God's people. To every outward appearance they were God's people. But their hearts were far from Him, as Isaiah said. They were more convinced of their own understanding than of God's truth. They were sure of their own worthiness before God, and thus in no need of a Savior.

"A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign." These words should have stung anyone whose hypocrisy was so plain. These men, if they were people of God, should have recognized that all the charges of hypocrisy and unbelief once made by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Micah, and Malachi were being leveled at them. They should have felt the sting of Isaiah's accusation so that they could hear what Isaiah said later, "You will say in that day: I will give thanks to You, O LORD, for though You were angry with me, Your anger turned away, that You might comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid; for the LORD God is my strength and my song. And He has become my salvation." (Isaiah 12:1-2)

God intended Israel to be the holy bride of the promised One, and He, the Savior, the bridegroom. But the bride had gone to those who were not her husband, to false gods and foolish trust in her own beauty. Israel, the bride of Christ, continued to commit spiritual adultery. The Pharisees and Sadducees knew these things. They knew what their own Scriptures said. They just did not believe them. They had fallen into the habit, so common to mankind, of interpreting the Scriptures in the light of what they wanted them to say, not what they actually said. They knew what Jesus meant when He called them an "adulterous generation." He was not accusing them of breaking the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." No, He was accusing them of breaking the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods." This was the very language of the prophets, language they understood, but refused to believe.

The problem lies in the heart of fallen and sinful man. Just as the first man tried to defend himself in the garden after his failure to take God at His word, so too do we hear God's word and, so often, fall into the trap of giving our meaning to His words. We hear His accusations of spiritual adultery and, even as we are listening, turn our

focus on someone else who, we are sure, must be the subjects of His wrath, for He cannot mean us. We are nothing like unfaithful Israel.

Dear friends, to doubt Jesus' Word and miracles is to commit spiritual adultery. It is to fear, love, and trust someone or something more than Him whom God sent into the world to be born of a virgin to save us. To reject Jesus as the only solution to our sin and guilt is to reject God. Jesus is the Sign of whom Isaiah wrote. He is also the sign of the prophet Jonah, given to us in these last days. He is the Sign of God's favor, of God's love and mercy, who poured out His wrath on Him who had no sin instead of pouring it out on us. The crucified and risen virgin's Son is the Sign that unfailingly points the way to heaven.

To this day people continue to expect signs from God over and above those signs He has already given. But consider this, as we look at history. Signs and miracles ended with apostles. Why? Because God through them gave us something greater and more certain, His written word. In it He gives us the Gospel, the good news of His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. In the Gospel He shows us the meaning of the Old Testament and how His every promise has been kept in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen. But for many this is not enough. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees they demand more signs, more proofs that God is who He says He is.

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The signs of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, commanded by and connected to the crucified and risen Christ, are final signs given us for our certainty, even though some call them mere actions performed by Christians to show their faith, and not the very means though which God forgives our sins and gives us faith. But dear friends, these signs were given us by our Lord to connect us to the Sign of Jonah, His last and final sign to His own people. Baptism and the Lord's Supper connect us to His crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection. Of Baptism St. Paul said, "We are buried with Christ by baptism into death, that just as He was raised from the dead, so also we should walk in newness of life." When in faith we receive Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins, Paul says, "you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."

Our generation is not exempt from the misbelief of the Pharisees and Sadducees. For that reason Jesus continues to point us to His cross and empty tomb, to the ministry that proclaims His Gospel, to Baptism and Lord's Supper, which connect us to Him. With these simple but powerful signs, He gives what we truly need. May God keep us from demanding further signs of His love, trusting instead the word and sacraments Christ gave us to point us to the Sign of Jonah, the crucified and risen Son of God and man, our Immanuel. There we have forgiveness, even for the sin of spiritual adultery. There in word and sacrament Jesus, the faithful Bridegroom and Savior, stands with us to the very end of life, and gives us eternal life. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria