

The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity | St. Matthew 16:1-4  
October 16, 2016 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

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“Lord God, I am grateful that You have given the indisputable sign of Jesus’ resurrection and, in this risen Christ, the assurance of forgiveness of my sin, the hope of life everlasting, and the promise of a personal resurrection of this dying body. I know that my Redeemer lives, and because He lives, I will see Him face-to-face in a life in which death and sorrow and decay cannot touch me. Praise to You, most gracious Father, for this blessed hope given to me through my risen and ever-living Savior. Amen” (*Meditations on the Gospels*, CPH, p. 102).

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for this morning is taken from the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, beginning with the first verse. We read as follows in Jesus’ name:*

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test [Jesus] they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed. <sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who day by day – at home – away, is our Staff and our Stay (ELH 177, v. 2), dear fellow redeemed:

The saying goes, “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky in morning, sailor’s warning.” But there were no warning signs for the storm that came upon the ship making its way across the sea. The rain flew into the sailors’ faces, and waves crashed onto the deck. A great wind drove the ship further and further into the tempest. The stay ropes strained as the big boat threatened to break in pieces. Any cargo that could be spared went overboard. Courageous men shuddered with fear. They fell to their knees and cried out to false gods who could not answer.

But one man on that ship was unaware of the danger. Through all the tossing and turning on the waves, he slept peacefully. The captain rushed down to him and cried, “*What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish!*” (Jon. 1:6). If this man offered a prayer, we do not know it. He joined the crew as the storm raged on. In their desperation, the men cast lots to see whose fault this evil was. The lot fell on the sleeper. “[H]url me into the sea,” he said; “*then the sea will quiet down for you*” (v. 12). After trying to row once again toward shore, the crew gave in. They threw the man overboard, and just as the man said it would, the sea quieted down.

And this is when things got even more interesting. “[T]he LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (v. 9), sent “*a great fish to swallow up*” the man (v. 17). This is how the

prophet Jonah came to spend three days and three nights in the belly of a fish. The crew had no warning signs of the danger that was coming when Jonah hopped on board. Those sailors could not have known that the almighty God commanded him to preach to the people of Assyria, and that Jonah had no intention of obeying Him. He was trying to run away from God by sailing as far from Assyria as possible. But even in his disobedience, the LORD used Jonah as a sign of The Promise. Some 800 years later, Jesus would compare Jonah's three days and nights in the belly of the fish to His pending death and His resurrection three days afterward (Mt. 12:40).

The Pharisees and Sadducees pestered Jesus for a sign from heaven, but the promise of His resurrection was the only one He offered and the only one they needed. As much as we look for special signs of God's love for us, God cannot prove His love any better than what Jesus has already done. **We Need No Sign from the Lord Our Stay.**

## I

In the historic Gospel reading for today (Jn. 4:46-54), we heard about a man who came to Jesus at Cana and asked Him to heal his dying son. It seems that word had spread about Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding feast (2:1-11). This distraught father was looking for a miracle. Jesus was looking for faith. To this man and the others who were gathered there, Jesus said, *"Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."* Under the circumstances, Jesus' response does not seem very kind. But remember that His primary mission was to save sinners, not heal the sick. The man pleaded with Him again to help. Jesus replied, *"Go; your son will live."* Through this powerful word of Jesus, the man believed and went home to find his son on the way to recovery.

This miracle was one in a long list of signs that should have convinced everyone beyond any doubt that Jesus was who He said He was—God in the flesh. But no matter how many deaf people were made to hear, mute people made to speak, diseased people made well, and demons cast out, many still denied that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed Savior. Among these were the Pharisees and Sadducees who badgered Jesus *"to show them a sign from heaven."* The signs He had already done were not enough for them. They wanted to see something drop out of heaven into their laps like the manna and quail the LORD gave to the wandering Israelites. But Jesus had nothing to prove. The burden was not on Him, but them. Even if He performed exactly the sign they wanted, they would not be convinced. What they needed, was to repent and believe His words.

*"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky,"* He said, *"but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."* In their hard-heartedness and spiritual blindness, He would give them no other sign than *"the sign of Jonah."* This was the same sign He had predicted when He said, *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"* (Jn. 2:19). The Jewish leaders knew what He was referring to. After Jesus was crucified they said to Pilate, *"Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise'"* (Mt. 27:63). They asked that a guard might be placed at the tomb and the stone secured. This played right into God's hands. It meant that there were even more eyewitnesses of the empty tomb when the angel rolled the stone away (Mt. 28:4,11-15).

Just as the LORD caused the great fish to spit out Jonah on dry land, so He caused the grave to give up its temporary Occupant. The sailors would not have believed their eyes to see Jonah

alive and well, and neither did Jesus' disciples believe what they were seeing on Easter Sunday. They saw Jesus alive again only three days after His brutal execution. They wondered if their minds were playing tricks on them or if this could be a ghost. Jesus knew their thoughts - "*See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see!*" (Lk. 24:39). It was true; He had risen from the dead! What could this mean? It meant that the chains of death were forever broken. It meant that the guilty were declared innocent, justified in God's sight. It meant that all believers in Christ would rise again in glory just like He did.

## II

What greater sign of God's love could there be than Jesus' death and resurrection? No other sign should be required. And yet Jesus says, "*An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign.*" That includes you and me. We want more signs, more assurances of God's faithfulness, especially when the storms of this life come upon us. We say, "God, if you really love me, make my pain go away." "If you really love me, keep this person from dying." "If you really love me, preserve me from trouble." These are conditions for loyalty more than they are statements of faith. In this way, we are not so far removed from the Pharisees and Sadducees, who essentially said, "Lord, we will believe in You IF...."

Faith is not even in the equation if we must be convinced of God's love by some visible sign. Faith in God is trusting in Him even when He seems absent from our lives or uncaring about our difficulties. Faith does not rest on what is seen and experienced, but on what is not seen (Heb. 11:1). We did not see Jesus redeem us from our sins, and we do not see Him today, but we believe that He has redeemed us and still blessed us.

Jonah did not see any way out of the belly of the great fish. For three dark, miserable days, He prayed in faith to the LORD. The LORD heard his prayer and delivered him from the fish (Jon. 2). Then He again commanded Jonah to preach to the Assyrians. This time Jonah went. He entered the capital city of Nineveh and called out, "*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*" (3:4). The word of the prophet reached the king, who immediately ordered the people of his kingdom to repent and cry to God for mercy. The LORD heard their prayers and "*relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them*" (3:10).

God hears your prayer of repentance, your cry for mercy, too. Even though you have doubted Him, run from Him, and even criticized Him at times, He is not angry toward you. He forgives your wrongs, just as He forgave Jonah. He abides with you, even in your moments of darkest trial and the times when terror comes upon you. He will always remain faithful to you, and He wants you to remain faithful to Him. He wants you to rely on Him in every need and to seek refuge in Him, your strong Fortress and Defender.

In our chief hymn for today, we prayed for the Triune God to be our "Stay" (ELH 18). We do not use the word "stay" like this very often today. A great picture of this word is the large ropes extending from the mast of a ship to the front and back of the vessel. These ropes are called "stay ropes" (forestay/backstay). They keep the mast secure, even in stormy weather. The LORD God is our Stay (Ps. 18:17-18). He keeps us secure in our faith and supports us, so that we do not topple over and fall to our destruction. As Martin Luther so powerfully wrote, "A mighty Fortress is our God, / A trusty Shield and Weapon; / Our help is He in all our need, / Our stay whate'er doth happen" (ELH 251, v. 1).

The Lord is your mighty Fortress and your Stay, whose strong cords of love and mercy toward you will never unravel or break. What more could we ask from God than what He has given us in Jesus? He will not forsake His own children who were bought with the price of His Son's death and resurrection. This gift of salvation by grace is better and surer than any other sign God could send. And so we say with the hymnwriter Paul Gerhardt, words which could just as well have been sung by the prophet Jonah:

This I believe, yea, rather, / In this I make my boast,  
That God is my dear Father, / The Friend who loves me most;  
And that, whate'er betide me, / My Savior is at hand  
Through stormy seas to guide me / And bring me safe to land. (ELH 517, v. 2)

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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