

The Third Sunday after Michaelmas (Trinity 21) – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. John 4:46-54: “Are You Looking for a Sign or a Savior?”
October 16/17, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Grant us, O Lord, the faith that rests not on signs and wonders but on Your love and faithfulness; that obedient to Your word and trusting in Your promises we may know Your peace and healing power, both in our hearts and in our homes; for the honor of Your holy name. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 126)

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

The sermon text for today is taken from the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

So [Jesus] came again to Cana in Galilee, where He had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to Him and asked Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. / So Jesus said to him, “Unless you [people] see signs and wonders you will not believe.” / The official said to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” / Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.” / The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” And he himself believed, and all his household. / This was now the second sign that Jesus did when He had come from Judea to Galilee. ^(ESV)

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

In Christ Jesus, who did many signs and wonders for the purpose of revealing who He was, so that all who believed in Him would have eternal life, dear fellow redeemed:

Years ago, I remember reading about an out-of-the-way place in Central or South America. A man was cooking something on a greasy grill. Then something on the grill caught his eye. There it was, an undeniable shape of that area's patron saint right there in the grease! As scores of people paraded through to get a glimpse of the greasy figure, they said among themselves, “It must be a sign!” But what was that “sign” supposed to mean exactly?

Many people are on the lookout for signs to help guide them forward in life. Some look to the stars and a daily horoscope for direction. Some see signs in the clouds. Some will observe a bird or a deer outside their window and take it as a sign that the spirit of a loved one is present. Some find signs in the random experiences and conversations they have in an otherwise typical day.

Probably all of us have wondered before if God was trying to send us a message through a sign—or at least we hoped that He would. Maybe we even asked Him for a sign and were

disappointed when nothing out of the ordinary happened. God certainly can and has communicated through signs, but His primary means of communication is not through unique signs. It is through His never-changing Word.

This is the central point of today's text. We hear that Jesus "*came again to Cana in Galilee.*" This is where He had performed "*the first of his signs,*" changing water into wine at a wedding (Joh. 2:11). These "signs," as the apostle John calls them, were more than miracles. They were special acts that revealed who Jesus really was – the Son of God incarnate, the long-promised Messiah. After the first sign in Cana, John reports that he and the other disciples of Jesus "*believed in him*" (v. 11).

Then Jesus went to Jerusalem and did more signs. As a result of these signs, "*many believed in his name*" (v. 23). But we find it was not a soul-saving faith (vv. 24-25). It was the signs that captured their attention. Who Jesus was did not interest them, as much as what Jesus could do. When Jesus returned to Galilee, He was welcomed by all the important people there. They rolled out the red carpet for Him because they wanted to see more signs (4:43-45).

It is no wonder that Jesus responded the way He did when a royal official asked Him to heal his son. Jesus said, "*Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.*" This message was for all the people and not just for the official. It was a preaching of the law. It was meant to convict the sign-seekers for not seeing past the signs, for not recognizing the most important thing.

Jesus' statement convicts us too. Who among us hasn't suffered, experienced some difficulty, and we said to ourselves, "I thought God loved me, but apparently He doesn't"? We were looking for a special sign of His love, for Him to provide instant relief and take away the pain. Or we were stuck in an intense struggle, full of inner turmoil, tempted to do what we knew we shouldn't, but we were too weak to resist. Where was God's strength and power when we needed it?

I suppose we want God to be something like a superhero. When we are at our most vulnerable, facing the greatest dangers and trials, we want God to swoop in and whisk us out of harm's way. This is what the royal official wanted Jesus to do. He wanted Him to hurry over to Capernaum and heal his dying son. This man was looking for a sign. Jesus wanted to give him something more.

"Go," said Jesus; "*your son will live.*" That was no sign like the people were hoping for. It was a Word, a simple statement. But there was power in it. The next thing we hear is that "*The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.*" It doesn't stand to reason! Why should the man believe what Jesus said? Jesus hadn't bothered to go and visit the child. He hadn't even sent along some special object that would heal the child when it touched him.

Why should the man believe what Jesus said? Because Jesus' Word is powerful. Not only did Jesus' Word bring instant healing to the sick boy, it also brought instant faith to the man's heart. The apostle Paul explains how this happens. In his letter to the Romans, he wrote that "*[the gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*" (1:16), and "*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*" (10:17).

The Word of Christ is where help is found in trouble, where comfort is found in sorrow, where strength is found in weakness. When we are struggling and suffering, Jesus doesn't tell us to look for signs in our lives that He loves us and cares for us. He tells us to look to His Word. His Word contains all the evidence of His love for us that we need.

His Word reveals the love of God the Father in sending His only Son to take on our flesh. His Word shows His own love in His perfectly pure life lived on our behalf and His suffering and death to pay for our sins. His Word changes us by the sanctifying work of God the Holy Spirit who brings and applies the good gifts of Jesus to us.

The Word of our Savior is all we need, but it doesn't seem like all we need. We want more than His Word when someone is seriously ill. We want more than His Word when we are troubled and hurting and don't know where to turn. We want more than His Word when someone we loved, someone we leaned on, is lowered in a casket into a vault. For our extraordinary problems and pains, we want more than the ordinary Word.

But God's Word is hardly ordinary. His Word had the power to heal a dying boy who was nearly twenty miles away. His Word absolved a paralyzed man and then caused him to walk (Mat. 9:1-8). His Word brought a young man from Nain (Luk. 7:11-17), a little girl (Mat. 9:18-26), and Jesus' friend Lazarus (Joh. 11:17-44) back from the dead. His Word will also raise you from the dead (1Th. 4:16).

The Word of Jesus is a powerful Word of life, and it is at work in you even now. As Jesus spoke life into the dying boy, so He speaks life into you. When you hear the Gospel message of His death and resurrection for you, that is Jesus saying to you, "I suffered in your place. I died for your sins and came alive again. Your sins are forgiven! Depart in peace. *Because I live, you also will live (Joh. 14:19).*"

His living Word does for you what nothing else in the world can do. His Word of absolution cleanses you from the sin and guilt that no amount of self-righteousness or self-punishment can fix. His Word heals the invisible wounds, the deep pains, that no psychiatric care or medicine can heal. His Word gives a hope and a confidence that no possession or power in the world can supply.

When Jesus joins His Word to water, it becomes a gracious water of life, a washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit (Ti. 3:5). When He joins His Word to bread and wine, it becomes a rich feast of forgiveness and salvation. You don't need other signs than these of God's love for you. In His Word and Sacraments, Jesus gives you more power to fight the devil than you can fathom, more treasures than the world can imagine, and more peace than any fleshly mind can comprehend.

His powerful, life-giving Word is the way that Jesus is at work in the world today. And yet we still think signs might be better. We want to see signs that He is turning government officials toward righteousness and justice. We want to see signs that He is influencing corporate leaders to promote what is good. We want to see signs that He is destroying the evil designs and wicked works of the devil.

If we are looking for signs of these things apart from the powerful activity of God's Word, we are looking in the wrong place. It is through the Word that Jesus conquers and changes hearts. His Word is "*the sword of the Spirit*" (Eph. 6:17), a more powerful weapon than anything we can concoct. This Word is at work right now in our hearts, in our congregations, in our country, and in the world.

Through His Word, Jesus speaks righteousness into you and forgiveness and hope and life, and He does the same thing for countless others who are helpless and hurting. He calls us away from the devil's temptations and the world's deceit. He comes not to bring earthly glory and peace, but to bring eternal glory and peace. Through His Word, Jesus always gives what you need, even if it doesn't come in the way you expect.

It was through Jesus' Word that the royal official believed. It was through Jesus' Word that the little boy was healed. You don't need to look for signs of God's power and love in the stars, in the clouds, or in things like grease stains. Your living Savior Jesus, who died on the cross for your sins and who rose from the dead on the third day in victory over your death, is found exactly where He promises He will be. He is found in His powerful Word of grace and in the Sacraments He instituted for your life and salvation.

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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