

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 12:38-42
Sermon Title: "What's Your Sign?"

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Everybody looks for a sign. We all do it. "Give us a sign," we say. "Show us what to do next." A girl looks for some indication that a certain boy likes her. An employee looks for a clue from the boss that he is doing a good job. A child looks for the signal of a parent's affection, because children need our affection and approval.

"Give us a sign," we say to God. "Make it crystal clear." A burning bush, writing on the wall, a donkey speaking to us, anything.¹ Just give us something.

A group of scribes and Pharisees have been listening to Jesus for quite some time. They heard Jesus talk about a house divided, the unpardonable sin, and a tree bearing much fruit.² Apparently, these lessons did nothing to persuade these scribes and Pharisees – they are not moved by these powerful words – so they call out to Jesus. They ask him to give them a sign.

This group of religious leaders is not looking for a

¹ Exodus 3, Daniel 5, and Numbers 22, respectively.

² Topics found in Matthew 12.

miracle but for a sign. A miracle would be the healing of a lame child or a blind woman. To be sure, these leaders have already seen these great things. Maybe they've already explained them away, so they don't believe they really were miracles. Now they want a sign, some powerful signal that comes down from heaven like a lightning bolt or a loud voice, proving Jesus is who he claims to be.

Jesus says no. You will not get a sign. Jesus says, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after signs." That is a harsh way of putting it. He seems to go after the scribes and Pharisees, lumping them in with sinful people who cheat and steal and carouse around with much drink and many women. That must have been a shock to these leaders who pride themselves on living such holy lives.

What Jesus is saying is, sinful people look for signs, and that is a bad thing, because they tend believe they can demand signs and thus be judge and jury to approve of those signs. The scribes and Pharisees cannot demand Jesus to give a sign, because signs are not put on for show or sold to the highest bidder.³ We do not control God in such a way as to demand anything from him. When a person asks for a sign, he or she expects one to come, and come

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 1, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*, 466.

soon. The person places himself or herself in a position of control, as though he or she can manipulate God, and get the sign he or she wants. People in control think others, even God, have to prove that they are trustworthy, dependable, kind, etc., etc. We were not created to be judges over anybody, especially not over God. This is why Jesus got so personal, when he said that an evil and adulterous generation seeks after signs. Such a generation thinks it is God, and thus demands proof of power and love, using their own misguided standards.

Although Jonah never requested a sign from God, he did think God should prove that he could be the God that Jonah always believed in. He believed God to be gracious and compassionate, but only to those who claimed him as God, only to those who did the right things and said the right things all the time. "Prove to me that you are the God I expect you to be. Prove that these evil and adulterous Ninevites should perish after 40 days. Prove that I am good for speaking your word to them. Give me a sign that I am correct." Jonah put himself in the role of judge and jury, and he thought he had the right to determine whether God did the right thing or the wrong thing in saving Nineveh.

Several centuries later we have some scribes and Pharisees doing the same thing in Matthew 12. "We

are the religious elite. We are the only ones who may judge right from wrong. Prove to us, Jesus, that you truly know right from wrong. Give us a sign to prove we are correct.”

The funny thing is: after Jesus berates them, he gives a sign. Even after saying what he did, he offers a heavenly indication to the scribes and Pharisees. God does offer signs, but only when they are appropriate. Only when God deems it to be the right time for us to receive a sign.

The sign Jesus gives takes us back to our dear old friend Jonah. Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a whale, and we know how awful that was. We know how Jonah cried out to God, thinking he was in some watery grave where nobody, not even God, could find him. Seaweed tormented him. The ribs of the whale felt like an iron jail surrounding him. When Jesus offers what happened to Jonah as a sign, he says that a similar thing will happen to the Son of Man. He will go three days and three nights “in the heart of the earth.”⁴ The Son of Man also will venture to the deep pit of death. He will also be encased by dirt, where nobody may ever find him again. Jesus will go to the place where condemned souls go.

⁴ Matthew 12:40.

But Jesus does not go to the pit of death (Sheol, it is called) for his own sins. Jonah had to travel by whale for a time, because he had some sins to work out with God. Once he worked them out, the whale spat him out. Jesus doesn't go to Sheol because he was a bad boy. He has no sins to work out that are his own. He has sins to work out, and they are our sins. In three-day's time, Jesus will do what is necessary for this evil and adulterous generation to be released from its sin, to give up control and stand vulnerable before God, so that this generation may spend eternity with its God and Lord.

And then Jesus goes on to say that the people of Nineveh, that great city that once had great sins, will be summoned to the courtroom to stand against this generation. Those people who were full of sin repented of that sin. They took action to receive forgiveness, and they were forgiven. Jesus says that this generation, the one that the scribes and Pharisees lived in, will not be forgiven because they don't want to be. They don't think they are that sinful, so why bother putting on sackcloth or fasting? They believe themselves to be the holy elite, so why would they stand in judgment? They are the judges judging others. They demand signs from heaven to prove that

people are who they say they are. They are too busy rationalizing their own perfection that they do not see how imperfect they really are.

The people of Nineveh were condemned as an evil and adulterous generation, and they changed. They were transformed by the word of God, by the mercy of God. The scribes and Pharisees have the word of God in their hands, written on scrolls to investigate for hours on end. They debated God's word in the synagogues all the time, and yet they still didn't get it. Next, they have the Word of God, Jesus, standing right in front of them. They had so many "opportunities of exposure to Jesus and his story" in order to be transformed, and yet they still chose to remain unchanged.⁵ They will perish. The people of Nineveh, who repented, will serve as an example of how the scribes and Pharisee should have acted.

The last nail on the coffin is when Jesus mentions the Queen of Sheba standing with those pagan Ninevites, standing in judgment against the holy elite and anybody else whose heart remained unmoved. At least the Queen of Sheba traveled hundreds of grueling miles to listen to Solomon's wisdom. She got herself in Solomon's presence, so she could hear directly from the one of the greatest minds that ever lived. The

⁵ Bruner, *Matthew 1-12*, 468.

scribes and Pharisees followed Jesus from one town to another, only 6 or 7 or 8 miles apart, and they still didn't hear anything. They refused to hear his wisdom that leads to everlasting life. All they did was demand signs, when the Sign from God was standing right there.

Everybody is looking for a sign. We all do it. We would love to see a burning bush or handwriting on the wall, so we may say, "Yes, that's it. God is with me." But if, like the scribes and Pharisees, all we do is demand God from signs, we will miss the actual signs that God wants us to see.

There was once a theologian named Paul Tillich, and he talked about signs and symbols. In fact, Tillich is the theologian known for signs and symbols. He thought that the two were the same, symbols and signs, in one regard: they point to something beyond themselves. A one-way sign, for example, point us down the road, in the direction we ought to go. We don't stand there and gawk at the sign. We do what it asks us to do, go that one way. A stop light points to the fact that cars are coming across the street, and we don't want to get hit. We better stay where we are, until the light turns green, which is the universal sign for Go. Signs tend to stay in one spot, but they always

point us to something else more important than the sign itself.

Throughout the Bible, God the Father gave us heavenly signs that point directly toward God the Son. We never demanded God to give us such signs – God offered them at the right time. We probably would have suggested others signs, but we are not the Giver of Signs from heaven. God gives the right signs at the right time.

At his birth, God the Father sent a star to point the way to Bethlehem and the holy birth. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended as a dove, anointing Jesus as the true Messiah. On the highest mountain, Elijah and Moses stood as signs to point the disciples toward Jesus' majesty and holiness. Eventually, at his triumphant entry, a donkey was used to signify that Jesus was the King of kings who comes in peace. On Good Friday, the cross is the sign of Jesus' suffering and death for our sin. On Easter, the tomb is our sign of our rebirth and new life. Stars and doves, crosses and tombs: many signs have been given to us from heaven to show who Jesus is. Each sign points us to our eternal Savior, because he is way-more important than the signs themselves.

But all of these signs fall away, when it comes to

the ultimate Sign. The ultimate Sign, the Sign we will ever need, is Christ himself. He is the living Sign, the everlasting Sign, our saving Sign. Of course, this sign is not an object like a one-way sign or stop light, but he is the Person who points us to eternity.

Jesus himself is the Sign of God. He is the reason for why the star existed to point the way, why the dove was able to descend from the sky, and why the cross was constructed on the Hill of the Skull.

He shows us what the image of God really looks like, sin-free, clean, perfect. He shows us what the perfect life looks like, in harmony with what God the Father is doing in the world. He displays within himself how all things are coming together, how all things are being reconciled unto him, being cleaned up, polished up, ready for a stain-free existence. Jesus Christ is our living Sign, the beginning of all things, the middle of all things, and the end of all things.

It is funny to hear the scribes and Pharisees demand a sign from Jesus, and all along the Sign has been standing there. The Sign of mercy and love, God's only-necessary Sign of healing and restoration, was always talking to them, always walking with them, always inviting them to receive him.

Our holy and everlasting Sign talks with us and we

cannot ignore him. He walks with us and we try to keep up, try to match his steps along the way. He invites us to follow him to different places for ministry and then finally to the last place which we will call home. We take the invitation. We take our Sign into our hearts. We never let him go.