

Pastor T.C. Arnold
21st Sunday after Trinity
John 4:46-54
October 24th, 2010

For the past couple of weeks in the Sunday morning Adult Bible study we have been taking a close look at a few news articles in the Saturday “Faith” section of the Kansas City Star (we call the Bible study, “The Gospel According to the Kansas City Star”). About ten years ago there was an article in the Star written by a man named Hugh McFadin entitled, “*Dear God, Are You There?*” In the article the agnostic McFadin says that he might just be able to believe in God if God would just give him the “signs” he has been looking for. McFadin says, “*Perhaps you could give me a sign, Lord. A sign like two or three inches of snow all over the world at the same time.*” Well, truth be told, God never promises such signs. So, be assured, we should not expect them. However, there is something else – something MORE – that is so much more important. Allow me to read again a portion of the Gospel text for this day.

“Once more He visited Cana in Galilee, where He had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When the man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to Him and begged Him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. ‘Unless you see miraculous signs and wonders,’ Jesus told him, ‘you will never believe.’ The royal official said, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies.’ Jesus replied, ‘You may go. Your son will live.’ The man took Jesus at his word and departed.”

The man took Jesus at His word and departed. He took Jesus at His word. Why? Well, because he had no choice but to take Jesus at His word. Jesus did not give him a choice simply because Jesus did not go with that royal official to his house in Capernaum to see his sick son. I’m sure the royal official had heard about all of those wonderful signs and wonders this Jesus had done for the people. And now he desired to see the benefits of Christ’s work for himself -- for his own son. Jesus gave him no choice but to trust His word.

Beloved in the Lord, what Jesus did is not foreign to our ears. What He did was to place importance on faith rather than signs and wonders. And we know how important faith is for the Christian. We talk about having faith, building our faith, strengthening our faith all the time. And if we talk about it so much and even know how important that “having faith” is, then why do people like Hugh McFadin, why do people like you and me, still want to see the signs and wonders?

Hebrews chapter eleven says, “*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” The Lord tells us straight up what faith is in His Word. The part about the “things not seen” is clear in the Word of God but is hard for you and me. Faith has the assurance in things not seen. But for many, maybe even for us, it simply is not enough.

When it comes to looking for signs and wonders are we putting our expectations up against God when we seek such things for our own benefit? When we seek just a hint of God’s presence to see if God is up there listening to us and being that great protector and provider we expect Him to be. And so we look around. “What has God done for me lately,” we ask? “What has God *not* done for me lately,” we say to ourselves? We say, “Why are you allowing me to feel so depressed, Lord? Why are you letting my kids, my mother, my husband, my wife to do these things to me?” And then we begin to be the judge of God based on how well He performs when the going gets tough. We start to rank His performance as if we are really in control over all time, space, and matter. Who’s leading whom? Are we trying to lead God? Do we trust in those words Jesus gave to that royal official, “*You may go. Your son will live.*”

This is exactly what that royal official in the text for today was doing. He was trying to lead God. He was trying to direct Him down the road to Capernaum so that he could see his son restored to health through yet another one of Jesus’ miraculous sign. The official in the story had his own idea on how the healing of his son would look. He wanted to lead God to the right place. He wanted to lead

God and show Him how it should be done. He wanted to make sure that God would do it right. The royal official had his own ideas, his own plan and he knew the best way to make his son better. “Come Jesus, I will show you what you need to do.”

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. In other words, the signs and wonders we assign to our Lord – to make sure He is there – to make sure He is paying attention, are not that which God promises to give you to show you He is there and paying attention. The Hebrews passage assures you of hope in Christ Jesus. The Gospel passage from St. John assures you that we can take Jesus at His Word and know that His Word is enough. By human nature we always want more and we want it in the way we expect to get it. And when it doesn't happen that way, we get angry at God, or we get disappointed in Him, or we even stop trusting that He really is in control.

The first two hymns that we sang this morning seem to be polar opposites. The first hymn, “Rejoice, My Heart, Be Glad and Sing,” is definitely a joyful hymn. “*Rejoice, my heart, be glad and sing, a cheerful trust maintain; For God, the source of everything, your portion shall remain*” (stanza 1). The second hymn, the Hymn of the Day, is entitled, “From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee”. Sorrow seems to describe such a hymn. “*From depths of woe I cry to Thee, in trial and tribulation; bend down thy gracious ear to me, Lord, hear my supplication...*” The truth of the matter, and for the very reason these two “polar opposite” hymns were chosen, is because they reflect the very lives we live today. One minute we are all about the joy life gives – we are happy and content. The next minute sorrow consumes us and we want answers – we want action from our Lord. We often times think that God is taking charge and getting it right. But when things go from bad to worse and sorrow dominates our lives, the Lord needs our help – the Lord needs our insight and direction to show Him how to work. The Lord needs something because He is not getting it right.

The fact is, we are wrong in assuming this. In times of joy and sorrow, the Lord is always in charge and in total control. It's true we don't always understand. But let us be like the royal official and “*take Him at His Word.*” Let us take seriously what the writer to the Hebrews says and trust with faith.

Looks can be deceiving, and our eyes - even our hearts- can play tricks on us. Jesus illustrates in our text how we are missing the real signs and wonders and continue to be misled by the type of wonders that can't be trusted. For you see, the real signs and wonders are before your very eyes and ears this morning. The signs and wonders that the Lord gives to us are in His Word, they are given in His Sacraments. They come to us by Grace, through Faith and these signs and wonders, for some reason are easily missed. We tend to overlook them and pass them by. But yet they are all the more real and life-giving than anything we could touch with our hands or see with our eyes.

In this place come those signs and wonders. In the life-giving waters of Holy Baptism, they come. In the grace and forgiveness shared with you in the Lord's Supper, they come. Our faith holds on to the promise that God is with us in the sorrowful times and in the joyful times. Beloved in the Lord, when you have faith that trusts in the death of our Savior on a cross standing on Calvary, we have joy no matter if sorrow defines our life right now or not. When joy is seen as our Savior who forgives and comforts no matter what, joy is present even when sorrow defines us. Don't forget the joy you have even in the midst of sorrow.

Jesus says to this royal official, “*Unless you see miraculous sign and wonders, you will never believe.*” Jesus was talking about the kind of signs and wonders they expected and looked for. But we have been given and are still being given signs and wonders daily. And if our request to God is, “Would you please give me a sign, Lord. Just so I know.” Our Lord's response is, “I have given it to you already and it is yours. It is your faith and the promise through your faith that I will provide and guide.” By it, you have received your sign. And there is no other sign needed. Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.