

September 28th: “Why Does This Generation Ask for A Sign?”

Welcome, my friends, to our series on Jesus and his complicated questions and answers. In these ten weeks, we'll be taking a closer look at ten conversations that Jesus had with the people of his time, and hopefully, this will give us some wisdom about how to live out these truths in our own modern era.

Two weeks ago, Pastor Heather gave us an incredible introduction, so if you missed that, be sure to check out the manuscript of her sermon posted on our website—that would be a great way to start this process if you're unfamiliar with Jesus, or just want to learn more about how we've set up this series. It will tell you all about how we're approaching these texts, how to cultivate curiosity inside of yourself, and how we hope that these meditations will be part of your growing faith.

Before we prepare to discuss the second question that Jesus addressed, I invite you to take a deep breath, and pray with me.

Guiding God, we look to you when our world feels chaotic and uncertain—we are in need of the comfort that only you can provide. We feel lost so much of the time, overwhelmed, disoriented, and distracted by the latest events, demands on our time, and needs of our families. We are desperate to know that we are going in the right direction, so as we gather here this morning, we ask you to be our divine compass. Lead us to places and spaces that are right for us, direct us towards paths that will bring us safety and peace, and shape us into people of integrity and purpose. Be with us now, in the serenity of this holy moment, we pray. Amen.

Last week, I made a mistake. It was 5pm on a Monday, and my fridge was mostly empty, save for a few sad looking containers of leftovers and a couple half empty condiments. My stomach began to growl, and I knew I had about twenty minutes to make a decision about dinner before I went full on hangry.

But here's where I messed up: I put on my shoes, packed up my wallet, grabbed my keys and got in my car—and headed to my neighborhood Trader Joe's.

BIG MISTAKE.

Anyone who has ever been to Trader Joe's during the post-work rush knows that it's not far off from the 5th circle of Dante's Inferno. And no, I don't mean the 3rd circle of the inferno, dedicated to the sin of gluttony—I specifically mean the 5th circle, the one where poor unfortunate wrathful souls are lost to the churning and muddy waters of the River Styx, and they are forced to claw at each other trying to escape. That's the most accurate picture of a Trader Joe's parking lot that I could imagine, Dante really nailed it on that one.

As soon as I entered the parking lot, I knew I was in for a bad time. The line was long, the spots were full, and even the far back corner where the compact cars normally park was a flurry of activity. I made one loop, then tried the parking garage above the store, even though it's a claustrophobic's nightmare—and still no luck. I took that as a sign—yes a sign from God—that I wasn't meant to grocery shop that day, so I came home and ordered Thai food from the restaurant a few doors down instead.

Was it a real sign from God? I don't know. Maybe? Maybe not. Ok, probably not, but it wasn't like God was going to speak directly to me and say something like “I give you divine permission to eat greasy takeout in place of the healthy salad you planned on,” right? No, I don't think God typically operates that way, even though that might be nice. I think I could enjoy my pad thai a little bit more if I knew that God verbally approved of my dietary laziness.

But that isn't to say that God doesn't have a history of using signs to communicate with human beings. We might be surprised to learn that as early as the first creation narrative, found in Genesis 1, we hear that God's design for the universe included built in signs for humanity, because verse 14 says this:

“And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.’” And then again in Genesis 9, when God comes to our ancestor Noah, he says this: “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

To Moses in Exodus 3, God promises, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” We hear this refrain in the historical writings as well. In 2 Kings 19:29, God speaks to King Hezekiah, saying, “This will be the sign for you, O Hezekiah: ‘This year you will eat what grows by itself, and the second year what springs from that. But in the third year sow and reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit.’” The prophets likewise looked for signs from God and pointed to them when they gave sermons to the nations that they served. They even recommended that God’s people ask for signs, like this instruction from Isaiah 7:11, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign: whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

Signs are also part of Jesus’ story from the very beginning. In the Gospel of Luke’s telling of the Christmas story, this message is given by angels to a group of shepherds: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Here’s where it gets confusing though: if signs are so integral to our spiritual story, then why does Jesus seem so against them in today’s passage from Mark’s Gospel? Why would Jesus, born out of this tradition, reject others who seemed to believe that signs were a natural part of their shared religious practice? Doesn’t that seem like a contradiction?

How are we supposed to understand the importance of signs AND this conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day? Well, let's take a closer look at this passage and see what we can find out.

Chapter 8 begins with Mark setting the stage—he describes how a large crowd has gathered, and Jesus takes a moment to speak with his disciples about how to deal with this unexpected circumstance. All these people are hungry, and there is a very real logistical concern about how to provide for their basic needs. They are in a remote place, far from the nearest Winco or Walmart, and they only had seven loaves and a few small fish. It's like if all your family showed up at your house expecting a big Sunday lunch, while you were just sitting down to eat a single microwave meal. How could you possibly feed multiple aunts, uncles, cousins, and children with just a small portion of Salisbury steak?? It sounds ridiculous, right? And it is, Jesus is fully aware that this looks like an impossible situation.

If you've heard this story before, you know that something miraculous happens. Like other stories in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus somehow turns this meager meal into a gigantic feast—enough that there are seven baskets of food left over after everyone has had their fill. Mark tells us that four thousand people (read: four thousand men) ate and were satisfied, so I think we can comfortably assume that there were many more thousands of women and children who also were able to participate.

After the clean up is done, Jesus gets in a boat with his followers and they travel to a region called Dalmanutha, which most scholars now agree is a location on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is there that Jesus is confronted by a group of Pharisees—religious leaders known for their expertise in the law and faith. However, these men do not come to Jesus with pure intentions like we might expect—our gospel writer explicitly tells us that they came to test Jesus—they came to trap him, or anger him, or publicly embarrass him—maybe even all three. As Pastor Heather mentioned two weeks ago, these kinds of situations included disingenuous questions—not inquiries designed to spark thoughtful conversation, but ways to harm and diminish

Jesus' leadership. And so Jesus gives us some clues about how to respond to these kinds of questions.

I love verse 12 in this passage, because I deeply relate to this version of Jesus who is tired of these kinds of dialogues. In the NIV translation, it read that Jesus "sighed deeply," but other versions give us more nuance and detail. In the New Living Translation, after the Pharisees demand a sign to prove Jesus' authority, the text says, "Jesus sighed deeply in his spirit." The Amplified Bible records, "He groaned *and* sighed deeply in His spirit."

Jesus, I get it, I really do. My body is also full of deep sighs and even a few groans. I'm tired of our modern conversations that are so full of barbs and insults. I'm tired of discussions that just become platforms for seeing who can shout the loudest. I'm tired of listening to discourse that is all about tripping up and confusing our opponents. I'm tired of arguments based on strawmans and whataboutisms, they feel exhausting to me. I know this isn't the main point of this sermon, but as an aside, can we all agree to stop this way of speaking to each other?

Because it seems like Jesus is not a fan of this way of communicating—he's not interested in falling into their trap, he knows that their question was not asked in good faith. It sounds like the Pharisees are really asking Jesus, "can you prove yourself?" They're challenging him: "can Jesus prove himself to the Messiah that he's claimed to be?"

Here's where we get to see a little bit of Mark's humor—because Jesus has just finished with a miracle! In this very chapter, Jesus has just given a huge sign about who he is and what he's capable of—he used his divine power to feed a hungry crowd! Mark clearly thinks it's funny that Jesus has basically given the community for the proof they're asking for—but apparently all the religious leaders didn't understand what they were seeing. Jesus asks, "why does this generation ask for a sign" because if they had been paying attention, the signs they were looking for are all around them! The proof they wanted is already right in front of them!

But they can't see it. Not because they don't have functioning eyes, but because they don't have the right perspective in their hearts.

And I wonder if sometimes we might have the same problem.

If you're trying to be a follower of Jesus in our modern world, you might be looking for signs to help guide you. You might be looking for signs that will point you in the right direction, or help you make a major decision, or discern a transition within your personal life. That's natural, and in line with how God's people have always navigated our complex existence. God's signs have guided us! God's signs are promises for us to remember!

But I wonder if we've missed the signs that were right in front of our faces, because we were waiting for a bigger or better sign that we thought we needed. I wonder if we have used so-called "signs" to prop up our own preferences or desires. I wonder if we've gotten so caught up in watching for specific signs, or demanding specific proof, that we miss that the signs are just tools, just ways to point us towards something greater. When we see the signs as the point themselves, the object of our faith, no amount of signs will ever be enough. We'll always want one more, then one more. We won't ever be satisfied. Because the signs aren't our true source, they aren't what we should worship.

When Jesus confronts these Pharisees, I think he's asking them to reexamine their faith, and I think we could do the same. Here's what we might ask ourselves this week:

Do we believe in the signs, or do we believe in the sign giver? Do we trust in the signs, or do we trust in the sign giver? Do we put our faith in the miracles, or do we put our faith in the miracle worker? Even if we never personally heard God's voice, even if we never witnessed a miracle like the one in this chapter, even if we never received a sign, would we still follow Jesus? Would we still want to live as he lived and love as he loved?

My friends, only you know your heart. Well, you and God.

Only you know your true motivations, your true thoughts, your true desires. Only you can figure that out for yourself. But I invite you to take some time over the next few days to think and pray about it. I invite you to encounter Jesus in a fresh way this week and have these conversations with him about what it is that you're really looking for. I invite you to a different way of seeing the world that will allow you to move through these complicated times with the ability to perceive God's enduring faithfulness to you and to all of us.

Here's the truth I want you to hear: Signs may come and go, but the sign giver remains the same—yesterday, today, and all future tomorrows.

We don't need to test God in order to prove that his presence and love is true. We can see the evidence all around us—you might see it in the beautiful vistas of creation, in the sweetness of treats shared with loved ones, or in the small pleasures of your daily life. You might look for it in the phone call of a friend expressing support, in the bounty of your garden harvest, or in the miracle of a newborn child or grandchild. All of those are ways that we can experience God's ongoing care for us.

So my prayer for all of us this morning is this: open our eyes that we may truly see.

Amen.