

Looking for Signs
November 3, 2013

One of the common ideas floating around the world is the following: **Surely if there were a God, He would do something to announce Himself.** Maybe you have heard someone say this or seen it in writing. Maybe you once thought it yourself before you became a believer. Or maybe at some time after you became a believer, you had doubts about God and wondered this to yourself. I mean, it makes sense, right? If God wants us to know Him, then why doesn't He do more to make Himself known?

He could appear in a vision to the whole world once a year or so to remind us He is watching. He could carve His name, Yahweh, or Jesus, with hailstones into the side of a mountain like Mount Rushmore. That would get people's attention. Then we wouldn't have people saying that God's name is Allah or Jehovah or something else.

Last week I talked about evidence for the reliability of the Bible. I wouldn't have to do that if God lowered it down from the heavens on live TV for everyone on earth to see. We would know it came from Him. We would know it is inerrant. We wouldn't waste time arguing about its authorship. Why didn't God do something like that?

We could think up lots of big miracles for everyone to see that would leave no doubt that God exists, who He is, what He wants of us. Yet, He has not done that. God doesn't do those kinds of miracles in our everyday lives. Again, if people saw those kinds of miracles every day, they would believe. They would have to believe.

God isn't doing the big miracles every day. In human history God hasn't done a whole lot of them. Look through the Bible and you see a period of human existence of roughly 6000 years. And in those years you see God revealing Himself to man. You see God relating to mankind. In doing this, we see God doing things that only God can do. We call them miracles. Sometimes they are really big miracles and lots of people see them. Other times they are smaller miracles and only a few people see them, or even only one person.

Miracles do not happen on their own or by some mysterious power that is part of the universe. It isn't karma, yin/yang, fate, luck, or magic. It is the power of the one and only all-powerful living God, creator of heaven and earth. It is His power and He uses it in the world to accomplish His purposes. He uses that power to do things that He needs done.

We see God doing miracles in human history, but not much all the time. Really we see two periods of a lot of miracles, both of which last about 40 years. The first period is when God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God chose a man named Moses and made him a prophet to the Israelites. He used miracles to convince Moses to volunteer. He then used miracles to convince the people to follow Moses. Then God used miracles to convince the king of Egypt to free his Israelite slaves. Finally, God used miracles to care for the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years until they He settled them in the land of Canaan.

Following this we have a period of about 1500 years where God doesn't do many of the big miracles. We see an occasional big one, and more small ones. But these are widely scattered.

Then we have another period of about 40 years of miracles. This begins when Jesus starts preaching the kingdom of God. Jesus healed people, exercised authority over the wind and waves, turned water into wine, commanded evil spirits to stop their dirty work in people's lives, and even raised some dead people back to life. This went on, as near as we can tell, for a good bit of three years, and then some of Jesus' followers, the ones called apostles, also did miracles for the next 30-40 years.

After that, during the rest of human history, we only see a relatively few miracles. And most of these have been smaller miracles, seen by fewer people. I hear, or read, of an occasional miracle like we read of in the New Testament. There are sources that I trust, and sources that I don't. The sources I trust report a miracle now and then.

God isn't doing the big miracles every day. But God is doing smaller miracles all the time. God is doing small miracles all the time, though most people don't notice them. You have to be looking for them to notice them. And you have to know what to look for.

You have to be of a mind to watch for the kinds of things God is doing every day all around you. This looking was the subject of a conversation that Jesus had with a man in the gospel of John. We're going to look at part of their conversation, and then I'll make some application from it for us.

John 3:1-12 (NIV) Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Sir, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. They were the guys in the community who most preserving of the Jewish religion. These were the conservatives. They resisted efforts to compromise with the Roman government. They pushed the people to be more observant and obedient to God. These were THE religious people of Israel.

And this man was not just A Pharisee. He was one of THE Pharisees, a man on the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. He was a man of note. He had worked his way up to a position of prestige and authority within the Pharisee tradition.

He recognizes what any Jew should have recognized. From their history they should arrive at the same conclusion Nicodemus did about Jesus. "We know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs (that means miracles) you are doing if God were not with him." He is starting off with a truth that is also a complement. He is doing the polite thing.

Jesus goes right to the heart of what Nicodemus wants to find out. Nicodemus wants to know what Jesus' teaching is all about. He hasn't gotten to that question yet, but that is where he is heading in coming to see Jesus. Jesus cuts right to it. He dispenses with the small talk, the preliminaries.

You must be born again to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus says. Nicodemus doesn't understand being born again. Now give him a break. We know that right now the kingdom of God is within us. It is a spiritual kingdom, not a physical kingdom. But the promise, through the prophet Isaiah was for a physical kingdom. The promise was that the nation of Israel would once again rise into a world power with a Jewish king, Messiah, on the throne, and that it would become THE world power and last for all eternity. This is what they were expecting. This is what John the Baptist was expecting. This is what the disciples of Jesus were expecting, even after the resurrection, even after Pentecost. That promise, through Isaiah has yet to be fulfilled. So cut Nicodemus some slack.

Jesus starts speaking about the wind and the Holy Spirit. He says no one has ever seen the wind. The wind is a mystery. All we know about the wind is its effect on other things. Halloween night it started to rain, but the winds were calm. The prediction was that by morning the winds would be high. Indeed, before I went to bed Thursday night, the streets were wet, but clear. When I awoke Friday morning, the streets were wet and covered with leaves. It was obvious that the wind had been blowing hard during the night.

We don't see the wind. We don't know where it comes from. In that day they had no idea what caused the wind. Now we do. But we still can't see the wind. We only see the effects of the wind. The same, Jesus said, is true of the Holy Spirit. We cannot see the Spirit, cannot predict where the Spirit will work or not work. We can only observe the effects of the Spirit.

Nicodemus says he still doesn't understand. Jesus counters with the fact that of all people, Nicodemus as one of the teachers of Israel SHOULD understand. Now note, this is before the general outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Nicodemus is not a Christian with the indwelling Holy Spirit. Yet Jesus expects him to be looking for the effects of the Holy Spirit and is disappointed that Nicodemus doesn't know what to look for.

Jesus says Spirit-minded people see evidence of the Holy Spirit of God around them. Jesus says if Nicodemus is not such a person who understands the spiritual things

happening on earth, he certainly won't accept Jesus' teaching about spiritual things taking place in heaven.

So let me ask you a question this morning. Are you just earthly-minded or spiritual-minded too? Do you know what spiritual effects of the Holy Spirit to be watching for in your daily life? God is doing miracles all around us. Do you know what they look like?

Look for signs of the Holy Spirit. When leaves are falling off the trees at a slant, moving sideways to the ground, you know the wind is blowing. In the same way, when you see happening that are only accomplished by the Holy Spirit, you know the Spirit is at work.

Later in John's gospel he quotes Jesus as saying that the Holy will convict the world of sin, and righteousness, and judgment. So **Look for people who are aware of their sin.**

It is popular today, to believe that any religion will get you to heaven, and that all we need to be aware of is what religions have in common. The conclusion is that we are just supposed to be good people and love each other. Be kind to others. By this watered down faith almost everybody on the planet will get to heaven.

Everyone thinks of themselves as a good person, as good as, or better, than the average person. Don't you think that of yourselves? Don't you believe you are as good as or better than the average person? Such people are not really humble. Such people are not aware, much, of their sin.

So when you see someone who IS down on himself because of sin, that is a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence and work.

John's gospel also reveals to us that the Holy Spirit reveals the meaning of spiritual truth. One day Jesus asked His disciples who they thought Him to be. Peter said, "You are the Christ." Jesus replied that Peter did come to that conclusion on his own. Rather the Spirit of God revealed it to him.

Understanding of spiritual truth comes from the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us that in his letter the church at Corinth. The Holy Spirit is our teacher when it comes to spiritual truth.

Many years ago, I encountered a young couple who had just become Christians. They walked into Sunday School one day smiling, literally from ear to ear. They were full of spiritual joy over a passage in Isaiah that we often read at Christmas. At the time I was pretty immature spiritually and had no clue what they were excited about. The Spirit had not yet given me the meaning of that passage.

When you encounter someone who is filled with joy over some aspect of spiritual truth that they have read in the Bible or heard in a sermon, it is evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in them. **Look for people who are excited about Biblical truth.**

And then one more thing to look for. Jesus says that God is busy drawing, attracting people to Himself. When you see that, you know that the Spirit is at work.

Just over a year ago, we lost Judy Long to death. She came to us as an adult, one who had not been in a church for many years. What faith she had before she came to us was pretty immature. But here, among us, she started to grow. She learned that the Christian life is one of relationship with Jesus more than anything else. Jesus kept bringing her back to that truth over and over. I saw it, heard it from her week by week in our Bible study group. It was exciting for me as her pastor to see and hear. And it was that relationship with Jesus that carried her through the battle with cancer.

Somehow, God spoke to her heart and brought her back to Himself as a wayward adult. God is still doing that in the world. He did it with others who are in our church. Maybe He is doing it with you.

Look for people who are coming to God. This too is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Your presence here is no accident. It is no coincidence. God drew you to this place. God is drawing you to Himself. This is one of the miracles God is doing today. God drew you to hear that you too can have a personal relationship with Him. I encourage you to say yes to Him today.