Signs from God

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Luke 11:29-32

Sermon Series: Life is Messy

I’m not alone in ignoring road signs. Some of you ignore them, also.

My commute, I don’t want to rub it in, is all of ten minutes long. While many of you drive one round trip to work each day, I shuttle back and forth constantly, since I’m here evenings and weekends. Chris and I have lived in the same home for 28 years. I estimate that I take a thousand trips to the church every year, which translates into 28,000 trips over the past 28 years.

I pass lots of street signs along the way. I counted 100 signs along my route this week. There are all sorts of signs—stop signs and speed limit signs and watch-for-turning-vehicle signs.

Stop signs are clearly imbedded in my mind. Other signs are less memorable. True confession: I didn’t know for certain the posted speed limit until I double-checked this week. I couldn’t tell you where the 35 mph zone shifts to a 25 mph zone.

These signs are clearly marked; make no mistake about it. Yet, I drive right past them. I see them, but I don’t. My mind is clearly elsewhere.

I’m not alone in ignoring road signs. Some of you ignore them, also. It’s obvious by the way you drive that you are sometimes oblivious about stop signs, construction signs and speed limit signs.

Sometimes we ignore these signs to our peril. Fortunately, we have people to help us remember. It’s the job of those in uniform to help us obey stop signs and speed limit signs.

I want to think with you today about signs. Jesus’ miracles in the gospels are called signs. John’s gospel is arranged as a series of eight miracles called signs (Cf. John 2:11; 4:54). These miracles serve as signs to authenticate Jesus’ ministry as the divine Son of God. Yet, some people ignore Jesus’ signs. They dismiss his miracles altogether.

Jesus declares in our lesson, “This generation is an evil generation; it seeks after signs” (Luke 11:29). There’s nothing wrong with Jesus’ signs, but there’s a big problem with how people interpret his signs.

In the story that precedes our lesson, Jesus casts a demon out of a man (Luke 11:14-26). It’s a convincing sign of Jesus’ power over evil. Yet, his critics attribute his exorcism to the work of Satan. Despite Jesus’ protestations that Satan cannot drive out Satan, his critics persist in their unbelief.
Elsewhere, Luke reports Jesus healing a crippled woman (13:10-17). Jesus’ opponents are quick to dismiss it, claiming that performing miracles on the Lord’s Day is a violation of Sabbath law. Jesus also heals a quadriplegic who is ingeniously lowered into Jesus’ presence on a stretcher (Luke 5:17-26). Jesus’ detractors again take him to task for claiming to forgive sins, since only God has authority to do so.

What could be more definitive than casting out demons and healing crippled people? Yet, what good is it for Jesus’ critics to ask for signs if they persist in writing them off and explaining them away.

This could be why Jesus says to the assembled crowd, “No sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah” (11:29). What does Jesus mean by the phrase “the sign of Jonah?” What on earth is he talking about?

The story of Jonah is recounted in an Old Testament book that bears his name. God calls Jonah to preach repentance to the people who live in Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, Israel’s arch enemy. Jonah isn’t the least bit interested in preaching repentance to foreigners. He doesn’t want them to respond favorably to his preaching and turn from their wicked ways. He would prefer that God would wipe them off the face of the earth. So, Jonah boards a ship headed in the opposite direction. When a violent storm erupts at sea, the sailors are convinced Jonah is to blame, so they throw him overboard. Jonah is subsequently swallowed by a great fish. This fish is often identified as a whale, but there is nothing in the text that says so definitively. Jonah spends three days in the belly of this big fish until he is vomited to shore. Jonah has, in that moment, a change of heart. No doubt sitting in a big fish for three days could have had something to do with it. When Jonah preaches repentance to the people of Nineveh, wouldn’t you know it! The whole town dons sackcloth and ashes and turns to the Lord.

If there is any doubt about the meaning of Jonah’s sign, what Jesus says in Matthew’s parallel version of this story should clarify the situation: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of that great fish, so Jesus was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (12:39). Jonah’s near-death experience and improbable rescue foreshadow Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jonah’s sign will only make sense when Jesus is put to death and is raised to life again. His death and resurrection serve as the ultimate sign.

The sign of Jonah became a popular first century Christian symbol. Some years ago, a condominium building was being remodeled in Jerusalem.
As workers excavated the basement level of this building, they discovered an ancient burial ground located two meters below the basement floor. Archeologists were called in to explore the findings. They lowered a robotic arm into the tomb and discovered several first century ossuaries there. An ossuary is a coffin-shaped box containing human remains. On the exterior of one ossuary was the etching of a large fish with a stick figure of a man in its mouth. Near the etching of this fish are four faint Hebrew letters which spell the name Jonah. Early Christians associated Jonah’s story with Jesus’ story. Jonah’s story anticipates Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Jesus declares, in verse 30, “For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation.” I said earlier that Jonah’s preaching was all about repentance. His message of repentance caused the people of Nineveh to turn away from evil and toward God. Jesus preaches a similar message. “Repent and believe the gospel,” he announces to all would-be disciples (Mark 1:15).

Jesus closes our passage by referencing the Queen of the South, in verse 31, who, in the Old Testament book of Kings, pays a visit to King Solomon. She wants to see for herself whether he is as wise as people purport him to be. Solomon’s wisdom makes a believer out of her. Jesus also announces that someone greater than Solomon is here.

Jesus returns, in verse 32, to this matter of Jonah’s preaching repentance to the people of Nineveh. As remarkable as Jonah’s preaching is that causes these Ninevites to respond, Jesus claims that someone greater than Jonah is here.

The Queen of Sheba and the people of Nineveh are both considered foreigners. These outsiders respond favorably to God’s message while the insiders, the so-called people of God, have the hardest time swallowing Jesus’ call to repentance.

Our passage addresses three essential questions: Who is Jesus? Why did he come? What is our response?

Who is Jesus? Jesus answers that someone greater than both Solomon and Jonah is here. You should be able to connect the dots. Jesus is speaking about himself. He is the Messiah, God’s anointed one, who has come to seek and save the lost.

Why did he come? We often answer this question in terms of Jesus saving us from our sins. I’m currently reading a biography of C.S. Lewis, who was, for much of his early life, a confirmed atheist. He came to believe in God in his 30s, yet still did not consider himself a Christian. He explained his difficulty in a letter to a friend that he could not see, “How the
life and death of Someone Else 2000 years ago could help us here and now.” After a long talk with his literary friend J.R.R. Tolkien, he came to discover that Christ’s death 2000 years ago had everything to do with the here and now.

You could say justice and mercy meet at the cross: God’s justice for sin and God’s mercy for sinners. God holds people accountable for sin, yet the punishment is not incurred by people like us who are responsible. God pays the penalty for our sins through Jesus Christ. In this way, justice is served, and we are the beneficiaries of God’s elaborate mercy.

What is our response? As Jesus himself said, “Repent and believe the gospel.” Repent is often spoken about pejoratively today. Repentance is often the particular domain of fire and brimstone preachers. That’s unfortunate, given that the original Greek word, metanoia, has a far different meaning. It’s a compound of two Greek words, meta meaning change and noia meaning mind. Literally, the word means to change one’s mind or alternatively to undergo a change of heart. Repentance means to do an about face. When we repent, we turn around and go in a new direction.

Let me personalize repentance for a moment. Some of us are going in the wrong direction. We’re making bad choices which has us on a dangerous trajectory. It may not look all that foreboding at the moment, but take this route to its ultimate destination and you’ll end up in a place you’d rather not visit. A steady course of drinking to excess, abusing prescription drugs or viewing pornography is killing us softly. If we insist on withholding forgiveness, the ensuing resentment will eat us alive. If we refuse to face our control or anger issues, the net effect won’t be pretty.

Where do you need to do a 180? Where do you need to make a U-turn? I talked at the outset of this sermon about road signs. Most jurisdictions don’t allow for U-turns. The good news is that God allows U-turns. Where do you need to repent and go a new way? I’m inviting you to identify areas of your life where you need to change. Let this change coalesce in your heart and mind right now. Once you’ve identified the change you want to make, ask God for strength and help in making good on your intentions. Share with at least one trusted Christian friend about your new resolve and ask him or her to join you in prayer. Decide once and for all to engage in practices and spiritual disciplines to help make this desired change a permanent reality in your life.