

“The Second Sign”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 6, 2022

5th Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 40:1-8

Rev. John Wahl

John 4:46-54

In the gospel of John, a “sign” is something that is not simply miraculous, but which serves as a marker of Jesus’ divine nature and mission to those who are open to seeing and believing it. The signs are pointers to the true identity of Jesus.

Throughout the gospel, John describes seven signs that Jesus performs, each revealing something significant about Jesus’ mission and identity. In the second chapter, Jesus turns water into wine – and not just any wine, but the best wine in vast quantities – revealing the abundance of God in Jesus. Here, in chapter four, Jesus heals the son of a royal official, a sign pointing to his ability to restore good health and his opposition to those things that keep the children of God from experiencing abundant life.

So, it’s important to keep in mind that the issue here is not the miracle itself, but signs that point to God’s presence in our lives. Each of us look for signs: whether to stay at one job or look for another, to keep faith in someone or give up on that relationship, to continue seeking treatment or give in to the inevitability of a diagnosis. At some point or another, we all look for signs; something to help us find our way or, at least, take the next step forward.¹

But whether they are called miracles or signs, there remains an underlying discomfort with these healing stories. Why, we sometimes wonder, is there such a difference in the way God “used to act” in ancient times and does now? Where are the healings – or other miraculous signs – in the midst of all the pain and suffering we see?

As we will see, Jesus is not just speaking, in this encounter, to one man – a royal official – but to us as well. The sign John describes is not just to allow this one child to live, but to help us – like this entire family – to better believe; even when our eyes have not seen.

¹ David Lose from *WorkingPreacher.com*

John places this account back in Galilee, reminding us that this was the setting of the wedding where Jesus turned the water into wine. This story concludes what is sometimes called the Cana-to-Cana cycle, where Jesus began working on behalf of his own family and friends, then widened his scope to encounter Nicodemus, the Jewish leader, then the Samaritan woman, and now a royal official, who may well have been a gentile. We are not told, for sure – it seems not to have mattered to John – but it seems that no matter where Jesus goes, the world – and the spectrum of people – that God loves seems to keep growing larger.²

Isn't that interesting? Because we seem to always say that the world is getting smaller. With all the advances in communication and technology, we can text or call or video-chat with people across the country or around the globe. There is more information now accessible through our phones than used to be in entire libraries. And yet, despite all we do or could know, what do we believe? Whose word can we really trust?

In Cana, Jesus encounters this royal official – this man of significant power and privilege – who seeks out Jesus because he feels powerless to help his son, who has fallen ill. Like in the story of the wedding, where the mother of Jesus worries that the wine has run out and believes that her son can do something about it, here a father comes to Jesus, with a belief that, somehow, Jesus can help. And like at the wedding, when Jesus said to his mother, “woman, what concern is this to me?” Jesus' initial response here also seems lukewarm; he says to the official, “unless you see miraculous signs and wonders, you won't believe.”

If you look more closely at these words, though, you realize that Jesus isn't just talking to the man standing in front of him; the “you” here is plural. He's really saying, *unless y'all see these things, y'all won't believe*. Through John, Jesus is really speaking to us, the readers of the story. We may want to believe, to put our trust in God, to not worry about health and money and relationships and world events, but we want signs: something to reveal that God is present with us, that will point out the path going forward.

Of course, we know that belief is not a constant. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, who had just been freed by God from their captivity in Egypt, we also require daily manna; signs that will point to God's presence in our lives; reminders that because God so loves the world, we – all of us – need not constantly worry about our lives.³

² Karoline Lewis, *John* in Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries.

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

Like the mother of Jesus who, undeterred by her son's apparent indifference, instructed the servants to "do whatever he tells you"; the royal official, here, does what Jesus says and goes home. He believes, we are told, the words that Jesus tells him; that "your son lives." He has not been given any evidence; Jesus did not, himself, go to the man's son and perform any ritual of healing. Still, the royal official – powerless to do anything to help his son – heads home. On his way, he is met by his servants who confirm that Jesus' words – "your son lives" – were true.

When asked when the fever broke, the servants tell him that it happened at one o'clock in the afternoon, literally, the seventh hour (since the sun had risen). John's readers would have heard this detail and understood that the number seven as a sign representing fullness or completion. Just as the week contains seven days, and just as the Samaritan woman – who had previously known six men before encountering a seventh, Jesus, at the well – the healing of the child in the seventh hour of the day would have meant that life had been restored to its fullness.⁴

The last thing we are told in this story is that the royal official and his entire household believed in Jesus. Separately, none of them had been full witnesses to the miraculous sign that Jesus had provided. It was only after meeting together and sharing their experiences to fill in the blanks that this extended family came to a full understanding of what had happened. What may have sounded, before, like a criticism – when Jesus said, "unless you see miraculous signs and wonders, you won't believe" – now appears to be an accurate description of what happened.

When you – all y'all – share stories and experiences, when you see the collective signs that God is present and active in your lives, offering to one another even seemingly small testimonies of abundance and life in its fullness – belief follows. It may not last; like the manna that came from heaven, belief is not something that we can gather up, store, and rest comfortably forever. Instead, we question and worry and doubt. We are human, after all. So, we often seek and require another dose of belief, another sign of God's generous provision. We need to be reminded, as a people, of all those ways and times that God has loved the world, all of creation, people of every place and kind.

For us, as God's people, coming to the Lord's Table is a sign; a reminder of God's love for the world and presence with us. A crucified Messiah – one who offers us his own body and blood – is not the kind of sign that his disciples were looking for, but it turned out to be the one they needed. For us, this may not be the daily manna that we seek; we would probably choose, instead, something like a safer world, a warmer winter, or a winning lottery ticket. While we are focused on

⁴ Jamie Clark-Soles from *WorkingPreacher.com*

seeing visible signs of an abundant life of fullness, God seems more intent on belief. If we received these things we long for, would we be happier, would we worry less? It's hard to say. But if we – each and all of us, in relationship – can believe – even if it is just for this day – that God is here, that God is providing for what we need – beyond, sometimes, what we want – then we can be a household of faith, a community that truly trusts in God's word and seeks to live out the gospel by loving God and our neighbor.

Yes, it can be confusing, even painful, to read these ancient stories of miraculous healing when we know of so many situations, and so many people, that are dire and broken. We want to see the miracle happen; there is nothing wrong with that. But sometimes God is offering us that which we don't expect and weren't looking for. Sometimes – amid the worries, questions and doubts – what we really need is faith enough for today; and the opportunity to be in relationship with God and with others who come to the table, together, to live out our common calling as God's people. Amen.