

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Luke 4:16-30 (NIV)

¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked. ²³Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’” ²⁴“I tell you the truth,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. ³⁰But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Theme: Show Us a Sign!

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned a Christmas gift that I received, a book called, “I Did It His Way,” which contains the religious BC cartoons from Johnny Hart. In one of the cartoons the character looks up to heaven and says, “God, if you’re up there, give me a sign.” The next frame has a large neon sign crashing to the ground which says, “I’m up here!” There have always been skeptics of our faith, people who desire signs and wonders from God before they will believe. The fact is that God has given us many signs, but they do not cause faith. It is the simple message of the Gospel, that breaks our unbelief and gives us faith in Jesus.

I. Many people say, “If God would just show me a sign.”

A lot of people look at it that way today. Last year a movie called, “Expelled,” was released. It is about the battle in our universities today that anyone who does not follow Darwinism is ostracized. At the end of the movie Ben Stein asks one of the most well known atheists of our day, Richard Dawkins, whether he believes in any god. Dawkins says many unkind things with regard to God, and says that he believes that there is almost no chance that a god exists. However, he is open to the belief that a higher form of aliens began life on this earth. At the end of the segment Stein asks Dawkins, that if there were a God, and if he stood before God, what would he say. Dawkins answer is, “Sir, why did you take such pains to hide yourself.”

Many people today believe like Dawkins, that there is no evidence to believe that there is a God. Some will even say that it is stupid to believe that there is a God. Most do not even differentiate

between religions. Because it can be proven that most religions have made up their stories, it is thought that all religions must be based on myth. Because God doesn't seem to drop a sign out of the sky every morning, they refuse to believe that there is a God.

Nothing has really changed. In 1 Corinthians 1:22 Paul writes, "*Jews demand miraculous signs.*" That is what the people of Nazareth wanted. They heard of the signs that Jesus performed in Capernaum, and they wanted Him to perform such miracles in Nazareth before they would believe that the son of Joseph was the Christ. Right from the beginning people have been challenging God to give them signs before they will believe.

II. The fact is that God has given us a multitude of signs.

Jesus did a host of miracles. Yet, those miracles did not bring people to faith. He did a miracle for the people of Nazareth. They tried to kill Him, and He was able to walk through their midst and go His way. It must have left them amazed that they were all racing to the cliff, and suddenly they saw Jesus walking the other way. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus feeds the 5,000 with just 5 loaves and 2 fish. In the next chapter He feeds 4,000 people with 7 loaves and a few small fish. Right after those two great miracles the Pharisees and Sadducees ask Him for a sign from heaven to prove that He is the Christ. In John 10 Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, a man who had been in the grave for 4 days. That miracle helped many people to believe in Jesus, but it also convinced the leaders that He had to die. The greatest of Jesus' miracles was His own resurrection from the dead. The apostles' even attested to the truth of the resurrection by the persecutions and martyrdoms that they were willing to endure rather than renounce their testimony that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

Throughout history there have been ample signs that our faith is true. No book in history has been so attacked as our Bible. Yet, it is always the critics which are proven wrong, and every attack has been shown to be without warrant. Think of how the Bible was put together. It is a miracle. Thirty Six seven men wrote the Bible over a period of 1500 years. Yet it all agrees. In the next several months, the Milwaukee Public Museum will have a display of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I found this line in Thursday's paper to be interesting, "**The exhibit explains the importance of the 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a find that some scholars believe did nothing less than *validate the Old Testament.***" Every archaeological find ends up validating what we have in the Bible.

The very existence of the church in our day is a miracle of time. The devil has tried to extinguish the church by persecution. Whenever the church came to new places, it was met with persecution. Thousands of Christians in the Roman Empire were killed because of their faith. Yet, the power of Rome eventually fell, and the lands of the empire became Christian. The church has been attacked with all kinds of false teaching. There has been teaching that Jesus is not God, that we are saved by our works rather than God's grace in Christ, that the Bible cannot be trusted. Yet, every time God raised up teachers, who kept the church grounded in God's Word. There have been times of apathy. Many of the medieval popes were more concerned with their power than the Gospel. Yet, the church survived. Today, we have so many other concerns and joys which we think are more important than our faith. It is a miracle that the church is still surviving the secularism, commercialism, and sports' mania of our day.

There is also the evidence of how God works in the lives of His people. He delivers us from many

evils, gives us all kinds of blessings, and gives us the peace that passes all understanding. Even creation itself declares the glory of God. In Acts 14:17 Paul told the people of Lystra, *“He has not left Himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their season; he provides you with plenty of good and fills your hearts with joy.”* Our Christian faith is not a blind faith. There is good reason for us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

III. The way that God works faith, however, is not through signs, but through the Gospel.

Jesus stood up that day and read a portion of the book of Isaiah. That section states, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* Jesus proclaimed the Gospel that He is our Savior. He preached the forgiveness of sins, and many people believed Him. After He rose from the dead, and the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, He brought many people to faith through that simple message of Christ crucified.

It has always been the message that brings people to faith, not the miracles. Think of the examples that Jesus gives in this text. They believed before they experienced the miracles. The widow of Zarephath served Elijah and believed his word before she received the miracle that the oil and flour didn’t run out. Namaan believed the Elisha’s word, and then he was healed.

That simple word of Christ comes to us also, and we believe it by the power of the Holy Spirit. Someone told us that Jesus Christ is our Savior. We were lost in sin, destined to die, and on our way to hell. But Jesus Christ took our sins upon Himself. He washes them away, clothes us with His righteousness, and makes us into the beloved children of God. We believe that word. We come to know Jesus Christ as our Savior. As we follow Him, He fills our lives with His joy, His peace, and His blessings. He also gives us many signs of His love for us in our lives. But it is especially His word which builds faith in our hearts. It is our baptism which reminds us that we belong to Him. The Word of the forgiveness of sins in His name gives us comfort. It is the mystery of His supper that assures us of the forgiveness of our sins. The Good News of Jesus Christ as our Savior is really what fills our hearts with faith.

The world claims to look for a sign, but God could drop a neon sign from heaven that says, “I’m up here,” and many people still would not believe. Don’t look for signs. Listen to the Gospel. It’s a miracle that the Gospel itself will turn your heart to believe that Jesus Christ is your Savior. God does give us signs that the Gospel is true, but God especially uses that simple message to work faith in our hearts. May His Spirit soften our hearts, that we don’t harden them against His Word, but through that word trust that Jesus Christ is our Savior. Amen.

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