

## Signs

It probably existed before then but the Rock and Roll era in music gave special life to the phenomenon known as the “One Hit Wonder.” I bet you all have your favorite example of a band or solo artist who burst upon the scene with a Top 40 hit that seemed to presage a long and vibrant career, only to disappear with just that one hit to their credit. If we were together, we might play that game this morning, but since, in this format, I can’t see or hear you, I’m afraid you’ll just have to live with my example. When I was 9, a Canadian rock group called, “The Five Man Electrical Band” released their second album, “Good-byes and Butterflies,” and an accompanying single, “Hello Melinda Goodbye.” Both went without notice. But the following year, they re-released the single, this time with what had been the B-side promoted as the song for DJs to play. It ended up as the #24 song of the year, according to *Billboard*. It was called, “Signs.” The first verse went like this: “And the sign said "Long-haired freaky people need not apply" / So I tucked my hair up under my hat and I went in to ask him why / He said "You look like a fine upstanding young man, I think you'll do" / So I took off my hat, I said "Imagine that. Huh! Me workin' for you!" / Sign, sign, everywhere a sign / Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind / Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?”

We’re going to think together today about signs – not the billboards and store window signs that so annoyed Les Emmerson of “The Five Man Electrical Band,” but the kind of signs that Jesus did and did not do, the kind that the Pharisees and the Sadducees came looking for, and the kind that God in God’s mercy still performs for us today. We’re going to think a little bit about those Pharisees and Sadducees and how odd it was that they came to Jesus together and what he said to them. And we’re going to think about what Jesus said to his disciples as they headed out in their fishing boat, about leaven and lessons and love. And, to quote from our estimable Founding Pastor, Bernie Turner, I’m going to remind us that we need to love everybody. How’s that for an agenda?

Before we dig into Matthew 16, though, I do need to make a quick reference back to the previous two chapters. In both, Jesus performs some of his most spectacular public miracles. First, in chapter 14, Jesus feeds five thousand of his fellow Galilean Jews. Regardless of how you interpret the functioning of that miracle, whether a supernatural multiplication of loaves and fishes or a modeled outpouring of generosity, it is a miracle nonetheless – an example of what can happen when a crowd of strangers hears the call to take care of each other. Jesus follows this with miracles of healing for an unknown number of people. Then, in chapter 15, Jesus and his disciples travel to Gentile territory, where he once again heals many people and feeds another large crowd, this time estimated at four thousand.

So, it’s incredibly ironic that a joint delegation of Pharisees and Sadducees show up at the beginning of chapter 16 and “(ask) him to show them a sign from heaven.” This is another one of those occasions when I feel like Jesus must be thinking, “You have *got* to be kidding me.” It seems likely that the religious leaders have come to check him out specifically because of the signs which he has already performed. But now they want to test him by asking him to perform right in front of them.

At this point, I want to put in a plug, as I so often do, for the importance of reading multiple versions of the Bible. The “New Revised Standard Version,” from which I generally preach and which we use as Pew Bibles in our Sanctuary, is a really good translation for reading and for

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study, as a general rule. But no translation is perfect and, in creating a good flow in English, the translators of the NRSV have obscured something in Matthew 16:1. The King James Version reads, “The Pharisees, with the Sadducees, came and, tempting him, desired that he would show them a sign from heaven.” Other versions say “testing him” but the Greek word here is the same one used in the story of Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness. Indeed, the contexts are quite similar. Like Satan, the religious leaders are tempting Jesus to make use of his God-given powers not to provide an act of mercy for hungry people but in order to “prove himself.” This, quite rightly, Jesus refuses to do.

Also obscured for us, not by translation but by time, is the remarkable occurrence of the Pharisees and the Sadducees coming together. Let me give you another pop culture illustration, from the 80s this time instead of the 70s. In the 1984 hit, “Ghostbusters,” Bill Murray as Dr. Peter Venkman, expresses his astonishment at the outlandish events by exclaiming, “Human sacrifice! Dogs and cats living together! Mass hysteria!” Well, Pharisees and Sadducees doing anything in concert was the first century equivalent of dogs and cats living together. Although the two groups could both be called religious leaders, they were as oppositional as today’s Democrats and Republicans. The Sadducees, whom we hear less from in the Gospels, were the representatives of the status quo, the “powers that be.” They supported the existing power structure at the Temple and the traditional way of reading Torah and of being Jewish. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were the representatives of the common folk, the villagers away from Jerusalem. Their approach to Torah was actually quite expansive, “setting a fence around the Law,” they called it. They were the “personal responsibility” crowd, as opposed to the “national religion” focus of the Sadducees. I’m distilling a whole lot of disagreement between them here in order to show categories that we can easily relate to, but I don’t think I’m distorting their positions beyond recognition. The point is, not only was it unusual for them to take a stance together, but we really ought to ask questions about why they would do so, much as if the Democratic Party and the Republican Party suddenly started sharing campaign planks. As the Romans would have said, “Cui bono?” Who benefits? Usually, the leadership class.

At any rate, Jesus is not impressed by their sudden unity or their request for a sign. He reminds them of the first century equivalent of the proverb that many of us, I think, grew up with: “Red sky at morning, sailors take warning; red sky at night, sailors delight.” Or vice-versa; I can never remember which part comes first. Jesus reverses it but that’s because, in the Hebrew tradition, a new day begins at sunset of the old one. “You guys are pretty good at recognizing signs for the weather,” he says, “but you wouldn’t recognize a sign from God if it hit you over the head.” Makes me wonder what kind of signs *we* miss, and I’ll come back to that later. “‘An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.’ Then he left them and went away.”

I hope you remember, because it was just seven weeks ago when I preached from this passage, that this is a near echo of Matthew 12: “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’ But he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’” In that passage, Jesus goes on to explain that he has in mind the three days and nights which Jonah spent in the belly of the fish, which he compares to the time he will spend “in the heart of the earth.” He may mean the same thing here, but I’m not so sure.

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Less widely remembered is another portion of the story of Jonah. Listen to this from Jonah 4: “Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’ But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’ Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’”

So, what’s the sign? Jonah was angry that God gave him a blessing, but only for a limited time. He was angry when the blessing expired. But he had not given thanks. And he was more concerned about his own comfort than with the lives of the Ninevites to whom he had been sent. In a similar way, the religious leaders of Jesus’ time did not recognize what God was doing right in front of them. They did not give thanks. And they were more concerned that Jesus might be taking away from their status and authority than with the spiritual and physical health of those that he healed, fed, and blessed; the very people that *they* should have been healing, feeding and blessing.

Let’s shift to the second half of this story. Jesus gets in a boat with the disciples to cross the lake yet again. “Beware,” he says to the disciples, “of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” Again, I’ve shifted back to the language of the King James Version. The NRSV says “yeast.” What’s the difference? Well, we’ve gotten pretty used to making bread with packaged, industrially produced, carefully sanitized yeast. In Jesus’ day, the process would have been much more like having a sourdough starter with any wild leaven that blew through. And, in case you didn’t know, some of the bacteria that is attracted to raw dough can make you sick. Really sick. So, I say “leaven,” instead of “yeast” to remind us that leaven was an iffy sort of thing. It could be bad for you – like the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, which is, of course, what Jesus was talking about. His disciples, as so often the case, were a little slow to figure this out.

What we have to figure out, then, was which teaching of the two groups Jesus had in mind. They didn’t have a lot of teachings in common, remember. Both of them were pretty much “our way or the highway” sorts of groups. Both insisted that they and they alone had the truth of God locked up. Both of them were suspicious about Jesus because for neither of them was he “their boy.” And so, both groups sent representatives to look for “a sign.”

All of this sounds like teaching of which we should beware. I remember the incident when Jesus’ disciples came to him and complained, “‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak

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evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” I like to think that at Good Shepherd Baptist Church, we are a “whoever is not against us is for us” kind of people. That’s part of why we are comfortable renting our space to other congregations. That’s part of why we miss occasionally rubbing shoulders with our friends in the Living Interfaith Church, who are Christians and Jews and Muslims and Baha’i and more. That’s part of why we are glad to call the ecumenical ministry of Lynnwood International Fellowship *our* ministry. We learned inclusivity from Jesus.

And I hope that, unlike the Pharisees and the Sadducees, we know how to read the signs of our times. God has done amazing things in our presence and we must recognize them, celebrate them, and give God the glory. Some of the things God has done for and through us have been big and flashy: Shepherd’s Garden is certainly one of those. People are still amazed when I tell him that our little congregation put together an eleven-million-dollar-plus project successfully and they are also still amazed at what a beautiful facility it is. I continue to have meetings with lay leaders and other pastors wondering how we pulled it off, hopefully so that they can do the same. And Pastor Stephen, Pastor Jorge, and I got to take yet another round of bows yesterday at the Seattle Baptist Union annual meeting, for our multicultural congregations project.

But we also need to recognize some of the small miracles that come our way and give thanks to God for them. In May, this congregation will mark its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, our “Diamond Jubilee,” if you will. That may not seem like much but when you consider how “unchurched” this area has always been and how that has only increased in the last couple of decades, I think it’s definitely by the grace of God that we are still here. Other churches I know of are in deep financial distress because of COVID. Not only did we receive another grant from Seattle Baptist Union to balance our books for 2020, but on Wednesday night, the Deacon Board reviewed our budget for 2021. We are budgeting some cuts, as is prudent. We know that some expenses will increase, such as utilities and insurance, because such things always increase. But because of your faithfulness, because God has protected the families in this church from financial catastrophe, because God has sent us new groups who will safely use our building and pay rent, we are able to have a budget slightly in the black for you all to approve in December. Thanks be to God!

Let me return for a minute to “The Five Man Electrical Band.” I especially loved that song back in 1971 for its last verse. I wonder if any of you remember it: “And the sign said, ‘Everybody welcome to come in, and kneel down and pray’ / But when they passed around the plate at the end of it all / I didn’t have a penny to pay / So I got me a pen and a paper and I made up my own little sign / I said, ‘Thank you, Lord, for thinkin’ ‘bout me. I’m alive and feelin’ fine.’” The sign on that church was the opposite of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. I think the reputation of this church is, too. But it’s a good reminder to us to continue the work that Pastor Bernie started here, that Jesus taught, and that God has always intended for all of God’s children to do, and that is, of course, to love and welcome everybody. So, we are going to sing now the hymn, “Fill the World with Love,” and may our prayer be that God will so fill us with the Holy Spirit that we can live out those words every day in the week to come and for the rest of our lives. For the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God! Amen.