

Sermon Text for September 5, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Matthew 12:38-40, Judges 6:36-40 *“The story of Gideon and the fleece”*

When I go to visit a family who has been through an especially difficult time I find myself praying for a sign for this family that they might tangibly and visibly see a sign from God to encourage them along this difficult journey, especially in a season in which it might be especially difficult. Have you ever asked for a sign from God? I told you about that time in Italy, the first real tragedy that I faced in my ministry as I found myself in a hospital room with a family who had before them a mom who had a stroke and was about to die and the son who was a new dad came to me distraught because he had made a deal with God that he could take his newborn son if he would keep his mom alive. It was to be a sign to him that God was listening.

With that experience and others like it and with the Scripture that we have in front of us today I had to pause a bit and ask the question, is it okay to ask God for a sign? After all in the Bible we find in one of the most famous Christmas passages God tells king Ahaz in Isaiah 7:10 we find God telling the king to ask for a sign, the king refuses and God says fine, I will give you a sign, the young girl, the virgin will bear a child and you will call him Immanuel. Immanuel, our Jesus, was a sign of God's presence.

So is it wrong to ask for a sign from God as you make your way through life? Not only did I always think it was not wrong, but I have frequently asked for a sign, I thought about it more this week, I still think it is okay, but the reason why we ask for a sign needs to be discovered a bit more. Both of our Scriptures today approach signs in a somewhat conflicted way, let's read.

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When we look at the New Testament and especially the Gospels we see them filled with the miracles and healings of Jesus. In the Gospel of John these healings and these miracles are called: guess what word?, signs. They are signs of who Jesus is, the Son of God, the Messiah, the one sent by God to heal his people and to provide reconciliation. The people are supposed to know who he is because of the signs that he is performing by healing, and miracles, and telling people that their sins are forgiving while encouraging them to get up and walk after they had been crippled for life. All of these signs were not for the sake of the individual who is healed, but more so for the people who are witnessing so that they might believe in who God is.

When we ask for a healing, when we ask for a miracle, when we ask for a sign, more often than not it is not so that others would see and believe, but more often than not it is so that the person that we care about and that we love will be healed and we would be perfectly content with it ending there. That is never the case with God. The healing of an individual is not just for the sake of the individual, but it serves as a sign for all those present and beyond that God is in control.

When we pick up our first Scripture today we start with the scribes and the Pharisees asking Jesus to show them a sign from him. Remember, these scribes and these Pharisees were what we could consider Jesus' enemies. They really didn't want to see a sign. Earlier in this chapter Jesus calls these same scribes and Pharisees, look at vs.34, just a few verses before this, "you brood of vipers". If you needed a sign that a person doesn't want you around, you brood of vipers seems to be a pretty clear one.

So Jesus isn't just answering anyone, he certainly isn't answering his disciples who wanted to know when the end times were coming, what sign would we see, and Jesus gives them signs and tells them what to look for. But in this case he says: an evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign. But wait, your disciples asked for a sign and you were okay with it. Yeah, but they were different. They really wanted to know. You just are looking to arrest me and kill me, you are an adulterous and evil generation. If you want a sign then look around you, look in the faith of your fathers and mothers, there are plenty of signs around you to see.

Why do we want to see a sign in our lives? When was the last time that you asked Jesus for a sign? I'm guessing it was not to prove that Jesus was alive, but rather because you found yourself in a desperate situation and just wanted God to reveal himself. Let me know that you are there. Let me know that you are alive. Let me know that you are on my side. You would be in good company, not bad company, if you asked for a sign in that way.

Let's look at Gideon. Young Gideon in Judges 6 makes this statement to his father as there is frustration because Midianites keep coming in raiding their camps and the Israelites are so weak there is nothing they can do about it. In 6:13 young Gideon asks this question to an angel sent by God: If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? Those who have suffered under generational slavery and poverty and consistently find themselves on the margins of society often ask that question. If God is for us, then why do we continue, year after year, generation after generation, find ourselves in the same position?

It should not surprise us that Gideon asks God for a sign before God tells him to go into battle, because he has done it before. Let's set the stage for the story of Gideon and the fleece. It

is probably the lesser known of the Gideon stories. I'm guessing that most of you do not know who Gideon is and probably never heard of him. He was a judge who was appointed by God to lead his people. This was in the times after Abraham, after Moses and before the kings, Saul and David. There were many famous judges that you know. Deborah, whom we have spoke about many times, Samson of the Samson and Delilah fame, that is coming up soon, and others.

Probably the most famous Gideon story is one that comes after the fleece and that is when Gideon prepares for battle with 32,000 warriors and God whittles it down to 300 and send him into battle that ways so that no one would say that it was because of their skill that they defeated the Midianites. We never ask for a sign from God when we think things are under our control and we can do things without God's help. We ask for signs when we are in need of God's help, and even though we have been told over and over again that God is with us, we just want to make sure.

That's what Gideon does here. God tells him to go into battle and Gideon wants to make sure that he heard God correctly. Look at vs.36. Gideon tells God, in order to see that you will do as I said, I have set up a test, a trial, for you to accomplish which will prove to me. Okay God, here is what we are going to do. What surprises me most about this Scripture is not so much Gideon's approach to God, telling him to prove himself with this trial, but rather that God actually does it.

I'm going to put this fleece out here. In the morning God, I want you to make the ground dry but the fleece wet. Good job, like a show dog, you did what I told you. Now, let's see if you can reverse it, the ground wet and the fleece dry. God does it as well. While this is a great Bible story and one that as children we have learned, I'm not too excited about the lesson that it potentially teaches our kids, and even more concerned about the lesson that it teaches us. In Exodus 17:27 we read that the Israelites put God to the test and demanded water at Meribah, as a result of this in Deuteronomy 6:16 we read: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Where else in the Bible do we hear that verse? Jesus says it to the devil when he is tempted in the wilderness.

Peter, before he walks on water says to Jesus: If it is you command me to walk out on the water. Prove it to me! Thomas when he is not present when Jesus comes says unless I see it with my own eyes, you have to prove it to me. I have to have a sign. We often feel that we need to have a sign or else our faith will be damaged. We think if we see a sign then we will understand and believe and eventually not only obey completely but follow all that God would

want us to do. Life for us would be easier if we were shown continual and consistent powerful signs.

Brothers and sisters Jesus has given us a world full of the signs of his presence. What you see before you, the sacrament of the Lord's supper is one of the most powerful signs we have of God's presence in our midst. We know that Jesus is present among us, and when we take part in the bread and in the juice we proclaim that fact. A sign of maturity is that we are able to discern and see the signs around us. Our goal is that which we read in Colossians 1:28 that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

It is not wrong to ask God for a sign. It is okay, I'm still going to pray for that, as the disciples asked Jesus for a sign, as Gideon did, and as others throughout Scripture were given signs. But we can't miss the signs in front us that God provides on a daily basis, they are there, they are there to strengthen our faith and to bring others closer to him as well. Amen.