

Can I Ask For A Sign?

Well, at least it can't get any worse. When was the last time you have said that? Probably by now, you have learned that these aren't the wisest words to come out of your mouth. Because it can *always* get worse. This is true in our time. And it was also true in Jesus' time. You'll remember from last week Jesus is in his own town, in his own synagogue, among his own people. He shares with them the news the angels proclaimed at his birth, that God was with them. *He* was the Messiah, the LORD's Anointed. And, where he expected to find joy, there was nothing. It can't get much worse than that, right? There's the old saying: "*nature abhors a vacuum*". Where there is nothing, something always rushes in to fill it. There was no joy. But it was very soon followed by very much complaining. For, in response to this great news that Jesus was the LORD's Anointed, Luke tells us: "*All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. 'Isn't this Joseph's son?' they asked. Jesus 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.'*" (Luke 4:22–23 NIV).

Jesus expected to find proclamations of praise. Instead, he finds demands for proof. He tells them: 'You might as well say the old proverb: *Doctor heal yourself!*' Of course, we understand the picture, don't we? It's kind of stupid to go to a doctor to be healed of cancer. And when he tells you that you're going to have to undergo chemotherapy, you tell him that if he wants to give *you* chemotherapy, he has to give *himself* chemotherapy. They wanted Jesus to prove that he was the LORD's Anointed by performing a miracle for them.

In response to their request, Jesus replies: "*I tell you the truth,*" he continued, "*no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I 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. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And 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.*" (Luke 4:24–27 NIV)

The people in Jesus' home synagogue demand miracles. So, Jesus goes back, way back in the Old Testament to words they would have been familiar with. He goes back to the time of Elijah and Elisha, when there were many, many miracles. And, as he travels through these words, notice two words repeated: *many* and *none*. There were *many* widows in Israel in Elijah's time. But, to where did the LORD send Elijah? The LORD sent him way up north to a godless, pagan land to a widow there. Likewise, there were *many* lepers in Elisha's time. But were any lepers healed in Israel? No, it was Naaman, the general of Aram, a nation opposed to and an enemy of Israel—he was the one who was healed of his leprosy.

Now, what is the point of Jesus' trip into Old Testament miracles? There are two lessons to learn: 1) Do not ask for miracles when you have God's word. 2) if God's people continue to despise his word, then the Holy Spirit moves on to a *different* people. He performs miracles for *them* and shares his promises with *them*.

So, did Jesus' own people understand what he was telling them? Did they understand that, if they continued to abandon God's word, the Holy Spirit would abandon them? Luke tells us: "*All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They 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. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.*" (Luke 4:28–30 NIV)

Did they understand what Jesus was saying? Yes! And they hated him for saying it. They grabbed him and threw him out of the synagogue and even tried to throw him off a cliff. Now, I don't want you to miss what is going on here. To be *thrown out of the synagogue* is their way of saying that Jesus is an unbeliever. Being *thrown out of the synagogue* is the Old Testament version of our *excommunication*. Jesus own people, in his own town excommunicated him for speaking the truth!

And what happened next? "*Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority.*" (Luke 4:30–32 NIV)

Here we find some of the most tragic words in the New Testament. Because Jesus' own people, in his own town rejected him, he had no choice but to go elsewhere—to a people who rejoiced at his words.

There, my brothers and sisters, is the account of Jesus being rejected in Nazareth. Now, if you were a pastor in

a pulpit, or a parent reading these words to his child at bedtime, where would you go from here? What lesson do these words teach us?

There are many directions we could go from here. But, let me narrow them down to two. First, notice the progression here—and not just here, but throughout all of God’s word. When God comes to his own people with joyous news and joyous promises, he expects to find joy. And when God’s people over the course of time show him that his word is not enough, that they need more proof, better proof than God’s word, what happens? When God’s people reject his word, the Holy Spirit has no other choice than to move somewhere else.

Martin Luther once said that the gospel is like a rain shower. It travels over an area. It waters it. It causes it to grow and be green. But, then it moves on. The gospel is like a rain shower. Wherever it is it causes faith to sprout and grow. But, when people continually grow cold toward and reject it, God’s word moves on.

It is sinful for us to find no joy in God’s word. But, even worse, it is sinful to demand proof apart from and outside of God’s word. Eventually this attitude leads us to the edge of the cliff. And we jump off it, even though our Savior wants to help us, he cannot. He has to move on, because what we most desperately wanted, we got.

Lesson 1: Do not despise God’s word. Lesson 2 is flows from lesson 1. If, like Jesus’ own people we ask the question: “can I ask for a sign?”, the answer God’s word gives to us is amazing: Why would you *want* to ask for a miracle or a sign? If you want a miracle, then go back to the waters of your baptism. There you will find the LORD’s Anointed rescuing you from the captivity of sin and Satan. If you want a miracle, ponder the LORD’s Supper. For at this rail, along with bread and wine, Jesus gives us his body and blood to offer and give to us the forgiveness of sins. If you want a miracle, then go to God’s written word. And there you will see one miracle after another that the Holy Spirit has worked in you. You see your desperate sin. You see your definite salvation. You see all the things God has given to you and you willingly, joyfully use them to serve God and those around you—that is a miracle. You see your Savior and all he has given to you. And when you are in your last days and in your last breaths, even when your sinful nature is making you doubt and despair, your new nature overcomes those lies and tells you that there is a God. He is good. He is wise. He is merciful and gracious. He has taken away your sins and given to you the gift of faith. And that gift of faith will guide you and guard you all the way into heaven. If you want a miracle, then look at all of these and be filled with joy, hope and confidence.

And so, as you consider all of these amazing miracles, isn’t it an amazing privilege we have to gather around God’s word with God’s people? With this in mind, I invite you all to join us during Lent. In Lent we have the great privilege of preparing our hearts and minds so that when Easter comes there will joy and appreciation in our hearts.

I speak this invitation knowing what it means. I know that it means that you will be carving our *more* time to come here. And, children, I know what it is like to come to church *yet again* during the middle of the week. But, children, let me tell you this. The first two years I went to high school, I went to midweek Lent services—all of them. And the last two years of high school I was involved in activities. And, as I look back, I don’t remember the track meets. I don’t remember the plays and the stagecraft. I don’t remember the choir events or the voice recitals that I went to instead of Lent. I don’t remember any of them. But I do remember going to midweek Lent those two first years. I remember singing old and beautiful hymns we don’t usually sing on Sunday morning. I remember a Savior who went through pain, just like I did in high school. He went through this pain *for me*. I remember gathering together with old people who must have been at least 40 years or older and realizing that they came here to see Jesus’ pain. And when Easter came, I rejoiced. I rejoiced because I saw my sin so clearly. I saw my Savior’s pain so clearly. And I saw the power of his resurrection intensely.

All of you, both young and old, if you want to *not* be these people in Nazareth; and if you want to have great joy in your heart on Easter, then travel with Jesus through Lent. Then you won’t need to ask for signs and miracles. Then you will not find nothing or even worse, rejection in your heart. You will be like the people that Jesus shared his word with. You will be amazed at his teaching and humbled by his authority. Amen.