

## Surrounded by Signs

To be understood, today's Gospel requires a little context. Jesus has been out healing, curing hundreds of sick and disabled people. When the crowd brings him an especially tough case, a possessed man who is also blind and mute, Jesus casts out the demon and restores the man's sight and speech. The astonished people wonder, "Can this be the Son of David?" It's another way of asking, "Is this the Messiah who will liberate us from Roman tyranny?"

That question came up a lot in Jesus's time. The Temple authorities had been forced into an unhappy alliance with their merciless Roman overlords. They could cooperate and keep the peace, or they could watch their people be annihilated by Rome's heavily armed and gleefully sadistic soldiers. Their choice to play ball with Caesar was pragmatic, but not popular. Self-proclaimed Messiahs were busting out all over, promising to defeat Rome and restore Adonai to his rightful place as the divine ruler over Israel. Every one of those wannabe Messiahs had the potential to ignite battles in the hills and riots in the streets that would almost certainly end in wholesale slaughter when Rome reasserted its supremacy. To prevent such a disaster, the Pharisees developed a way to discredit false Messiahs. They asked any would-be savior to announce a miracle and then perform it, the way stage magicians do. Whenever a wannabe Messiah failed to pull off whatever he promised, he could be dismissed as a fraud. The unsuccessful miracle worker might still be crucified by Rome for sedition, but widespread rebellion would be averted and the Hebrew people would be kept safe, if sadly disillusioned.

So, when the crowd starts wondering if Jesus is the Messiah, the Pharisees intervene. Jesus never bothers to announce his miracles before he performs them; there's no "watch carefully as I cure this man's withered hand," or "observe and marvel as I raise Lazarus from the dead!" Jesus's refusal to indulge in empty showmanship makes his miracles that much more

credible to us but, to the Pharisees, the absence of specific promises about what he intends to do before he does it calls all of his healings into question. As in so many other things, Jesus isn't following their rules. When they ask to "see a sign" from him, they're not just telling Jesus to perform yet another miracle. They're ordering him to respect their authority by doing it the way they want it done.

Knowing Jesus, it's no surprise that he pretty much tells the Pharisees to go pound salt. When he refers to an "evil and adulterous generation," Jesus means those whose skepticism undermines their faith in God. When he refers to the "sign of the prophet Jonah," he means the three days and nights that Jonah spent in the belly of the whale that swallowed him at sea and spat him up on the beach at Nineveh. This is probably a reference to the three days and nights between Jesus's Crucifixion and Resurrection, though nobody in this passage understands it because Jesus hasn't been crucified and resurrected yet. But when Jesus asserts that something greater than Jonah and Solomon is here, there's no missing his message. He claims to be greater than an honored Hebrew prophet and a singularly brilliant magician king. Such seeming arrogance from a Galilean peasant probably drives the Pharisees right up the wall.

But if the Pharisees had been able to put aside their preconceptions and truly see Jesus, they would have known that he wasn't overselling himself. Whatever parlor tricks other would-be Messiahs managed to conjure up, I doubt that any of them even came close to accomplishing what Jesus routinely did. Jesus didn't heal the occasional solitary leper or stretch a single loaf of bread to feed a couple of extra people. He performed miracles on a massive scale: gallons of water turned to wine, hundreds of instantaneous, impossible healings, enough food to feed thousands with baskets of leftovers, seafood catches so vast that they strained fishermen's nets to the breaking point. He didn't need to prove to the Pharisees or anyone else that he was the

Messiah, and they shouldn't have needed yet another sign to figure it out. There were already plenty of signs right in front of them. All they had to do was look honestly at Jesus, and they would have known without a doubt who he was.

That makes me wonder whether the Pharisees really wanted the Messiah to come at all. They can't have welcomed the Roman occupation, but at least they knew what to expect from Caesar's minions. The Messianic prophecies were short on detail. When the Messiah came, what would become of the priests and scribes? Would they remain in the Temple, retaining their authority, or would they be humbled, even punished for breaching Divine law or collaborating with Rome? Perhaps, like St. Augustine, who famously said, "Lord, give me chastity and temperance—but not yet," the Pharisees weren't ready to meet their Redeemer. Better to sow skepticism, to set up hurdles in the hope that no self-proclaimed savior would ever get over them. Better to insist who the Messiah ought to be than to admit the truth of who he actually was.

I don't mean to be too hard on the Pharisees. Human beings aren't often good at facing up to unwanted truths, even when the hard facts are all around us. There's no better example than our handling of environmental degradation. We've known for decades that we were overheating the atmosphere with carbon emissions, poisoning the land, air and water with our chemicals and fertilizers, sentencing wildlife to extinction with our greedy destruction of their habitats and food sources. But we've chosen to ignore or minimize the many signs that Creation is suffering massive, perhaps irreversible damage at our hands. Now, in the midst of the hottest summer in recorded history, as Greece and Canada burn and coral reefs bleach bone white and single-use plastics wash up on coasts all over the world, we can't deny any longer that we've made a spectacular mess of Creation. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner Jesus comes back to rescue us, the better. I'd like there still to be some polar bears and honeybees around when he arrives.

Meanwhile, one lesson we can take from this passage is not to play games with the truth or demand signs from Heaven to guide our steps. In addition to giving us Scripture, God blessed most of us with enough intelligence to make sense of what we see, especially if we're willing to work at it. Whether in global matters like care for Creation or more personal things like the way we treat our families, friends, and neighbors, we normally have some idea of how Jesus wants us to handle things. When we don't, perhaps Jesus prefers us to take a step back and devote some time to prayer and discernment until his will becomes clear. I'm pretty sure he doesn't appreciate it if we ignore unpleasant facts or drag our heels looking for "just one more sign" when there's something he wants us to do. Jesus isn't a carnival act who has to coax us along with signs and wonders. It's our job to use our heads, face the truth, and answer when he calls.

There's a second lesson in today's Gospel that might not be so obvious. While the Pharisees blustered and badgered Jesus for a sign, the people who needed his help just showed up and asked him for it. They wondered if Jesus might be the Messiah, but they didn't let their uncertainty keep them from coming to him. We know he's the Messiah, so we have no excuse for hanging back. He'll help us, too, if we ask him, and we can trust him to help in the way that's best for us, even if we don't yet know exactly what we need.

It's easy to get overwhelmed when we look at the state of our world. I'm not at all sure we can fix things without a lot of help from on high. Fortunately, we're blessed with a God who has shown us that he can be counted on to do huge, impossible things. If we're smart enough to ask, I believe he'll clean up much of the mess we've made. If we're wise enough to ask from sincere and loving hearts, I bet he'll even let us participate, and that will be a blessing. The only thing better than letting God heal you is God letting you help with healing something or someone else. The sooner we get started, the more good we can do. *Amen.*