

An Easter Sign

March 31st, 2013

Luke 11:27-36

"²⁹When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. ³⁰For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. ³¹The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. ³²The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."

This is not a predictable Easter text, but I believe that's in harmony with the character and ministry of the One we celebrate on Easter Sunday (and every Sunday), Jesus Christ. As I began to investigate Jesus thirteen years ago, one of the things that attracted me to His glory was how out of sync He was (and is) from the world's expectations. Even His enemies admitted, "¹⁶Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances." When the hostile Pharisees sent officers to seize Jesus, they came back empty-handed with this explanation: "⁴⁶No one ever spoke like this man!"

So it would not be surprising if Jesus said something peculiar and unlikely on Easter Sunday. We've been studying the book of Luke for fifteen months, and my plan was to deviate from our trek through Luke (as I did last week, on Palm Sunday) for Easter, celebrate the resurrection from Ephesians 1, and then return to it next Sunday. But the Lord changed my plans as I looked at this next portion of Luke that was coming, and saw the reference to "the sign of Jonah". Then I noticed that His word here was given "when the crowds were increasing," which is exactly what happens in every church on Easter.

So I took that as the Holy Spirit's prompting that this text was what He wanted declared on Easter, no matter how unconventional it felt to me, or to you. Because Jesus is out of sync with the world, He is always

relevant to the world. If He always did and said what we thought He should do or say, I'd imagine He was just a figment of our imagination. So let's allow the true, undomesticated Jesus to speak to us today. I'd rather let Him be what He is, because it's often the offensive side of Jesus that we need most. If there were no great evils and no deaf, blind hearts and no eternal consequences, then maybe the only fitting forms of love would be soft, tender words. But that's not the world we live in.

An Evil, Sign-Seeking Generation

So we'll start in verse 29: "When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign..." What's making them evil is their pursuit of a sign from Jesus, demonstrating that He really is who He says He is. One atheist I know captures their sentiment in 21st century language:

I really would LOVE to believe, really, I would. And it wouldn't be that difficult, just a whisper in the ear from God would do it. A minor miracle would be nice. Not allowing 9-1-1, the Tsunami, Katrina, children dying all over the world, parental and priest abuse of children all would have helped.

Jesus exposes the smokescreen in these words, and calls it for what it is: evil. He knows that their seeking of a sign was not an indication of their willingness to believe if only adequate evidence were provided; it was a rationalizing of their unwillingness to believe the perfectly adequate evidence they already had been given. That's the point of the illustration Jesus gives in verses 33-36. Jesus has come as light, it is shining brightly and in full view. The problem is not a lack of light; the problem is the failure of their sight. Their eyes are blinded by the cataracts of unrepentant sin and selfishness and pride and self-righteousness, so that they can't see the light that is present in Jesus.

This is why the religious leaders are asking for a sign. They want to give the impression that there is not enough evidence that Jesus is the

Messiah, and so they are justified in not receiving Him as their King. But, in reality, Jesus exposes here that they don't *want* Him as their King, and so they play intellectual games to justify their rebellion rather than submit to His rule and reign.

That's the way it is for those today who would ask for more evidence. As much as they might protest, the problem is not a lack of evidence. The problem is that their evil hearts disorder their rational powers and make them morally incapable of reasoning rightly about what Jesus has already revealed.

It's not hard to see why: when you study Caesar's Gallic wars (which is not nearly as well-attested as the life and ministry of Jesus), embracing the evidence doesn't require you to change the way you live in any way at all. But if the accounts of Jesus' life and teaching are true, you'll have to change the way you live this afternoon! If it's true, you've lost control of your life, your life is no longer your own, it belongs to Jesus.

And since the natural, proud, self-centered human heart does not want Jesus as Lord, but wants to be our own lord, our hardened hearts distort our reason to the point that we cannot use it to draw true conclusions from what is right there in front of our eyes (Ephesians 4:18; John 7:17). If we don't want God to be God, our rational faculties will not be able to infer that he is God. Our unrighteousness disorders the capacity to see truth. That's why Jesus calls His generation (and ours) an evil generation, and warns them that if they will not turn from their stubbornness of heart, a horrible judgment is coming (v.31-32).

Something Greater is Here

There's so much that could be said here, but let's not miss the clear, beautiful statement that Jesus is greater than Jonah and Solomon. We'll return to Jonah in a few minutes, but the reference to Solomon goes back to 1 Kings 10, when the Queen of Sheba had heard of Solomon's extravagant wealth and extraordinary wisdom, journeyed to see him,

and when she saw all that he possessed, "there was no more breath in her". How much more, then, should the unsearchable riches of the greatness of Jesus Christ take our breath away!

—the greatness of His *deity*, equal with God the Father in all His attributes—the radiance of His glory and the exact imprint of His nature, infinite, boundless in all His excellencies;

—the greatness of His *eternality* that makes the mind of man explode with the incomprehensible thought that Christ never had a beginning, but simply always was; sheer, absolute reality while all the universe is fragile, contingent, like a shadow by comparison to His all-defining, ever-existing substance;

—the greatness of His own inexhaustible *gladness* in the fellowship of the Trinity, the infinite power and energy that gave rise to all the universe and will one day be the inheritance of every struggling believer;

—the greatness of His never-changing *constancy* in all His virtues and all His character and all His commitments—the same yesterday, today, and forever;

—the greatness of His *knowledge* that makes the Library of Congress and all the information on the Internet look like a pre-school curriculum;

—the greatness of His *wisdom* that has never been perplexed by any complication and can never be counseled the wisest of men;

—the greatness of His *authority* over heaven and earth and hell, without whose permission no man and no demon can move one inch, who changes times and seasons, removes kings and sets up kings; does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the

inhabitants of the earth; so none can stay His hand or say to him, “What have you done?”

—the greatness of His *sovereignty* without which not a single bird falls to the ground in the furthest reaches of the Amazon forest, or a single hair of any head turns black or white;

—the greatness of His *word* that moment by moment upholds the universe and holds in being all the molecules and atoms and subatomic world we have never yet dreamed of;

—the greatness of His *power* to walk on water, cleanse lepers and heal the lame, open the eyes of the blind, cause the deaf to hear and storms to cease and the dead to rise, with a single word: "Child, arise!" (8:54);

—the greatness of His *purity* never to sin, or to have one millisecond of a bad attitude or an evil, lustful thought;

—the greatness of His *trustworthiness* never to break His word or let one promise fall to the ground;

—the greatness of His *justice* to render in due time all moral accounts in the universe settled either on the cross or in hell;

—the greatness of His *patience* to endure our dullness for decade after decade; and to hold back His final judgment on this land and on the world, that many might repent;

—the greatness of His servant-hearted *obedience* to keep His Father’s commandments perfectly and then embrace the excruciating pain of the cross willingly;

—the greatness of His *meekness* and lowliness and tenderness that will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick;

—the greatness of His *wrath* that will one day explode against this world from heaven with such fierceness that people will long to die, but death will flee from them;

—the greatness of His *grace* that gives life to spiritually dead rebels and wakens faith in hell-bound haters of God, and justifies the ungodly with His own righteousness;

—the greatness of His *love* that willingly dies for us even while we were sinners and frees us for the ever-increasing joy in praising His greatness forever;

Dear friends, look at the riches of the greatness of the Son of God, Jesus Christ! Do you see how much greater He is than Solomon, or Jonah! But the queen of Sheba will rise up and condemn Jesus' generation, because wealth and splendor infinitely greater than Solomon's was right in front of them, yet they didn't care!

Do you not see what a tragedy it is that some of you would hear all of this and have more interest in eating some ham and watching a little television? Do you tremble at such willful, damnable, adulterous blindness that is? To all those who ignore the revelation of God found in Jesus Christ, God says, "⁵Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."

The Sign of Jonah

Yet Easter Sunday speaks of good news for such callous, hard-hearted, blind, rebellious skeptics. How do we know that this greatness of Jesus is really there? How do we know He is not a myth? Jesus speaks tough words to this crowd, but He also holds out the promise of grace: "²⁹This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." Evil as they are, as much

as they have willfully blinded themselves to His light, Jesus says He will give one more sign.

The sign of Jonah is explained in Matthew 12:40, "⁴⁰For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." As Jonah was entombed three days in the belly of the whale, Jesus Christ was buried in a grave, having been crucified as an atoning sacrifice for our stubborn, rebellious hostility to His lordship in our lives. "⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

And as Jonah was expelled from the whale to go and preach repentance to the nation of Nineveh, so Jesus was expelled from the grave on the third day. The only sign the Ninevites were given was a man swallowed up by a big fish; we have been given the sign of a Man swallowed up by death itself, and risen in triumph to declare that the work of salvation had been accomplished, and to declare that repentance and forgiveness of sins should now be proclaimed in His name to the ends of the earth:

"⁴⁶Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

And here we are today, 2,000 years later and 5,000 miles removed from Jerusalem, worshiping Jesus Christ as the Lord of the universe. How is that possible? Rationally speaking, if you wanted to concoct a story today that your grandfather had been raised from his tomb and was Lord of all, how long do you think it takes before you're committed to an insane asylum? Yet, 5,000 miles, and 2,000 years removed, we worship Jesus as King. How? Because He has been raised! This is the sign, once for all, declaring that Jesus is who He said He is. As Tim Keller has said, "The resurrection is God's way of stamping 'paid in full' right across history, so that nobody could miss it."

The Holy Spirit Shines the Light of Christ's Glory

Nevertheless, as we gather here today, some of you rejoice in this glorious, risen Jesus, and others of you look at your watches, eager to get out of here. Some of you do miss God's "stamp", not because there isn't enough evidence, but because you don't *want* the evidence He has given: "¹⁹And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." You are willfully blind, and your only hope is what is described in 2 Corinthians 4:

"⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

If you have seen glory in the face of this crucified, risen and reigning King, give Him thanks today, for it is the Holy Spirit who has shone that light into your heart (3:18)! And if you should still say today, "Larry, I don't feel like looking at God. I just want to go home and watch television. I just want to be with my friends. I just want to eat and work on my house. I don't feel any desire to look to God"?

To this I respond: if there is any remnant of fear, if there is any shred of desire to desire, I urge you to do what Jesus urges us to do in 11:13, to ask for the Holy Spirit, that you might be released from your blindness. "Open my eyes, set me free, and bring me into the blessedness of those who hear and keep Your word."