

# Beware!

Psalm 65, Matthew 16:1-12

“An evil adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” That is odd—a sign from heaven would be nice we think. Something definite, something reassuring—a bolt of lightning, a direct word, a miracle. Something to let us know that God is God. But the sign of Jonah? What is that? The biggest fish story in the whole Bible.

Jonah was thrown into the sea, and he spent three days in the belly of the great fish then to be spewed out on the far shore. Then it hits us. Jesus was nailed to the cross; then he spent three days in the belly of the tomb, and he came out on the far shore of eternal life. That is the only sign we shall receive. Take it or leave it.

Who then is Jesus Christ? He is the one who was crucified, dead, and buried. He was rejected by the people of Israel through their official leaders. He was rejected by the Roman Empire through the powers of the state. He was crucified, executed in the most gruesome way possible. He was thrown away and cast aside. All the powers that be thought they had done away with him.

Then he was resurrected. God raised him from death to new life. He was the same person, but he was forever beyond the power of death, forever beyond the power of disease or decay or decline. Everything that Jesus was and is, everything that he was about, is concentrated into this event and this moment. He is the one who was crucified and resurrected. The resurrection is the all or nothing of the Christian faith. Have we seen it? No, no one saw it. Even in the accounts in the gospel, those who met the risen Lord Jesus did so after the resurrection. No one was present at the time that it occurred. How then and why shall we believe in this sign of who Jesus is, and what he is about?

The most important reason we have to believe in it is the faithful witness of the disciples. It has been recorded for us through the scriptures. It has been passed down to us through generations of the Christian Church. These men and women met and were encountered by the risen, living Jesus Christ. It was not a ghost. It was not an apparition. It was not a dream. It was a real person meeting them, commissioning them, empowering them, sending them into the world with a message that he was live and with a task to accomplish spreading his gospel.

Immediately after his crucifixion these people were cowering behind locked doors with good reason for fear for their own lives. If the authorities had arrested and executed their leader, it stood to reason that they would be next. Soon they were

encountered by the risen, the resurrected Jesus Christ. They were given the commission to go preach, and very soon they were out in the streets on the corners proclaiming publicly that Jesus Christ was alive again.

This does not make sense from any human point of view. They had nothing to gain by it. In fact so far as we know they were all arrested and executed for their effort. Going out and telling about Jesus Christ would not make them rich, would not make them famous, would not make them safe or secure. Quite the opposite. They could have, maybe, if they got away from the authorities, slipped back into their previous ways of life. This put them into the limelight. It subjected them to ridicule and to arrest and to execution. It does not make sense from a human point of view except for one reason. And the only reason that makes sense out of it is that Jesus Christ truly is alive and truly did encounter them and tell them to do this. There can be no other possible explanation.

Another reason for our relying upon this sign, which was given 2000 years ago, is the failure of the Roman Empire to put an end to their preaching. As they began to preach on the corners of the streets and gather congregations and convert people to Christianity, this became an increasing problem for the authorities. It is significant that the entire military force of the Roman Empire was incapable of producing the body of Jesus Christ. The easiest way to have ended this new faith would have been to exhume the body. To have said, "Here is your Jesus. What are you talking about when you say he is alive?"

The fact that they did not do that certainly suggests very strongly that they could not do that because there was no body there. It is also the case as we look back at this sign that we realize that God has shown us here that the power of God is greater than the power of death.

Death is a secondrate power. It has the power to destroy, to annul, to take away, to undo, but it does not have the power to create. And if it were the greatest power, there would be no explanation of how we are here at all. The fact that we are here is indicative that the power of God to create is greater than the power of death to destroy. The resurrection is our affirmation that the power of God to recreate is greater than the power of death to destroy. Death will be allowed the next to the last word about us, but it shall not be allowed the final word.

The sign of Jonah, the sign of the resurrection, is the sign of who Jesus is and what he is about. Without this sign, we would have nothing. For without the resurrection death would be final. We would have no hope. Life would be meaningless, and there would be no good reason for love, or courage, or heroism, or even common courtesy among us. Without this sign we would have nothing, but with this sign we have everything. For with the resurrection of Jesus Christ death is defeated. We are given the assurance of a new life beyond death, a life where all

that is incomplete in this life can be completed, where all that is not clear here can be clarified, where all that is wrong here can be corrected. And because we can now have good hope for life eternal, we also have good hope and good courage for the living of this life here and now.

We have this sign alone, the sign of Jonah, the sign of the crucifixion, the death, the burial, and then the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This one sign shows us that everything is focused upon Christ alone. Christ crucified and resurrected is our one sign from God. Christ is the one word we have from God to which we have to listen. Christ is the Son of God. Christ is our mediator. Indeed, Christ is our savior, Christ and Christ alone. We do not need Christ and some other savior. We do not need Christ and some other sign. We do not need Christ and some other supplementary word from Jesus Christ as if what he said were not enough. We do not need still more life from God. We do not need Christ and political correctness. We do not need Christ and the enlightenment of the modern world. We do not need Christ and wealth. We do not need Christ and armies. We have Christ alone. And Christ meets all our needs.

This is brought into sharp focus in today's reading when Jesus says, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." The poor old disciples thought Jesus was talking about bread. The point of this story is not to ridicule them. The point of this story is the question that continues to be aimed directly at us: Do we not yet perceive? How is it that we fail to perceive? "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

We have been reading through the Gospel according to Matthew up to this point chapter by chapter and verse by verse. Do we not yet perceive? We have already been given the sign of Jonah. Do we not yet perceive? We have been given 2000 years of church faith and history. Do we not yet perceive? Who is this Jesus Christ? He is the Son of God. And since he is the Son of God, we owe him everything—our faith, our lives, our worship, our possessions, our dedication, our commitment, our service, our everything. Since he is the Son of God, we owe him everything. If he were not the Son of God, we would owe him nothing. There is no in between. So which shall it be? Do we not yet perceive? No sign shall be given except the sign of Jonah.

Who is this Jesus? This is the one who said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." "Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees." By the way, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were enemies. They could not get along. The fact that they came together at this point to tempt Jesus to bring a sign shows how desperate they were in the face of his ministry.

What was their teaching? For one thing they sought the spectacular. They sought some terrific new sign from heaven that would prove conclusively who Jesus was, and what he was about. If we look behind their request for the spectacular, we understand that the significance of it is that they have by that very request rejected as worthless all the words and teachings of Jesus Christ. They have rejected as worthless all the works and healings of Jesus Christ. Because if they saw those and rejected them and still wanted a sign, they thought everything he had done up to this point was insignificant.

We live in danger that today we are tempted to seek another sign, to seek another reassurance, to seek some word that would help us believe when we do not believe. And yet we have already been given the word of God. We have already been given Jesus Christ. We have already been given the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What else do we still need? What other false teachings are we to be aware of today? It may not be the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees that is still active among us, but there are other false teachings. Anything that would suggest to us that the Bible is not the word of God is a false and dangerous teaching we ought to reject. Anything that would suggest to us that Jesus is not the Son of God is a false and dangerous teaching which we should reject.

There are certainly voices in the world today that are happy to say the Jesus was a great teacher especially if you are willing to say that he was one great teacher among many great teachers of humanity. Clearly this relativizes who he is and what he is about. If you believe that he is a great teacher, then you should pay attention to what he actually taught, and what he actually taught points to his unique authority. He is not content to be regarded as one teacher among many. Beware those who praise Christ too faintly.

Anything that suggests that we know better than the Bible, anything that suggests that we know better than Jesus Christ who God is and what God is about, is a false and dangerous teaching. We need to reject it. Anything that openly rejects or ridicules Jesus Christ is a false and dangerous teaching of which we need to beware. Anything that ignores Jesus Christ is a false and dangerous teaching of which we need to beware.

Some nine or ten years ago I remember seeing on a morning television show some pictures of great tapestries hanging on the wall of the Biltmore Estate outside of Asheville, North Carolina. I had been to the Biltmore Estate. I had seen those tapestries. I knew what they were about. The reporter said that the tapestries were hung there to teach morals. Well, the tapestries were scenes from Bible stories. There was one grand depiction of Adam and Eve. There was one of Jesus washing the feet of the Apostle Peter, and on and on. These were not there to teach morals. These were there to teach the word of God. They were depictions, pictures of

stories and scenes from the Bible. Either the reporter did not know that, which is of course a distinct possibility, or the reporter did not want to mention the Bible or the word of God or Jesus Christ on the air, which is also a distinct possibility. Beware the attempt to ignore the reality of God and Jesus Christ. Those are false and dangerous teachings.

Beware anything that suggests that we may receive salvation by any other source than the grace of God. Some would hold high education, economics, politics, the military. All of these things are important to us and to our lives. It is important that these things be done well. But they will not save the world. They will not save a single person. Anything that suggests that it does not matter what you believe, as long as you believe sincerely, is a false and dangerous teaching, much to be avoided. Many people have believed many wrong things with all their heart.

Beware the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Beware the false teaching of the day, of our day, which would lead us away from Jesus Christ. “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” “Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

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