

4th Sunday in Lent
Texts: Exodus 16:2-21; John 6:1-15
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“Give Me a Sign!”

I don't know about you, but one of the things I hear a lot from people who are dealing with some sort of struggle or hardship or uncertainty in life is how they are looking to God for a sign. *“Just give me a sign, God. Show me what I should do. Give me a sign...anything...so that I'll know that You hear me; so that I'll know that You're involved and working on this. Give me a sign, God, so I'll know if this is the right decision or not.”* If this sounds familiar to you, it should. We've all been there a time or two, right?

And before we go any further I should point out that such prayer (and that's what this is) is **NOT necessarily** wrong. All too often such behavior is immediately *discouraged* because it smacks of “doubt” and “unfaithfulness.” Only a Doubting Thomas asks for proof, right? Only a Doubting Thomas demands a sign *before* he'll believe. Well...who said anything about *ultimatums*? Who said anything about, *“give me a sign or else I won't believe”*? Scripture is filled with accounts of faithful men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, and David praying to God and asking Him for some sort of sign for the very same reasons we do. Like us, they were weak. They were in need. They called out to God in faith to act; to show Himself. **Folks: There's NOTHING wrong with asking God for a sign!**

Where it does goes off the rail (and it does) is when you don't get the sign *you're expecting or looking for*. You don't get the sign *you want (or demand)*, so you either keep asking for a different sign (ask until you get what you want, right?), or you go looking around and shopping around somewhere else for the sign you do want, or you just do what you want to do anyway and chalk it up to God didn't answer your prayer and give you a sign. He left you hanging, so you'll just follow your heart and go forward with your plans. ***After all, if God didn't want me to do this, He would give me a sign, right?*** This happens a lot, doesn't it? *“God, if you don't want me to do this, give me a sign!”* We then wait 3-5 seconds for a lightning bolt or a pillar of fire or some other miraculous heaven-rending sign, and when we're not “zapped,” we chalk it up to, *“Well, clearly God is okay with this! If not, He'd let me know.”*

The reason I lead with all this talk of signs and proof is because, believe it or not, but God has a **LONG** history of giving very clear signs and proofs of His providence, care, love, and mercy for His people, ***even and especially when they didn't deserve it***. In fact, God's very long history is filled predominantly with His **initiative**. What I mean by that is that God was ***already*** showing and giving miraculous, powerful signs and proofs of Himself, His presence, His working, and His love ***before*** anyone ever asked Him to do so. ***Before*** they could even mess it

up on their own, God is already reaching out and tapping them on the shoulder. *“Hey, turn around! I’m right here! Look! Listen! Believe!”*

Just consider the Old Testament lesson for today. The Israelites under Moses are complaining like a bunch of melodramatic teenagers that they have **NOTHING** to eat. *“We left Egypt for this?! We had it good in Egypt. We had pots full of meat and tons of bread, and now you say we’re free, but we’re starving to death. We were better off in Egyptian bondage!”* Before Moses can even turn around and lament to God, *“Why me?”* God is reaching out to Moses and telling him, *“I’m about to rain bread from heaven upon all of you. My children will be provided for every single day, morning and evening.”* And God did it. He sent quail in the evening, and every morning, like dew on the grass, the ground was covered in fine, flake-like bread, enough to fill the bellies of every single Israelite.

And how do the people respond to such real-and-tangible proofs of God’s love and providence? *“What’s this?”* They take one look at that manna from heaven covering the ground, and they ask, *“What is this?”* That’s what the Hebrew word “manna” means. It doesn’t mean “heavenly bread” or anything like that. *Ma-nah* means *“What is this?”* Think about that. ***They are literally covered up in God’s goodness and providence, and they don’t see it.*** They don’t recognize it. They miss the very sign and proof that God gives them. Why? It doesn’t match up with their expectations or desires. So blinded were they to God’s very real and tangible sign and proof that Moses had to serve as the “seeing eye dog,” so to speak. *“What’s this? This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat!”*

Fast-forward about 1,400 years and we hear in our Gospel lesson that the massive crowd of 5,000 who had come out to see and hear Jesus was famished and it was late in the day, and no one had anything to eat. ***Again, God takes the initiative.*** *“Philip, look at all these people. Where are they going to get something to eat?”* And St. John is sure to tell us that Jesus asked this, not because He was looking for advice, but because He already knew ***exactly*** what He was going to do, but He wanted to ***strengthen and exercise and grow*** the disciples’ faith a bit. And the disciples, Scripture’s Keystone Cops, once again miss the mark and come up short. *“Enough food to feed all these people?! Seven months worth of wages couldn’t buy enough bread to feed this horde!”* Peter’s brother, Andrew, sounds like he’s getting close when he says, *“Well...this young lad here has two loaves and five fish.”* But then he immediately shows he doesn’t get it either. *“But what good will this little bit do for so many people?”* The thought of asking almighty God—the very almighty God standing before them in the flesh—never even occurred to them. They claimed to confess Christ as Lord; Christ as God-in-the-flesh, but when push came to shove, they were blind. They saw only what they wanted or were willing to see.

I've said this more than a few times, but it bears repeating. This is where I see Jesus crossing His arms and pinching the bridge of His nose like He has a sinus headache, letting out a bit of a disappointed sigh, and telling His little band of fools, "*Just have the people sit down.*" And then Jesus does what He does. ***He does what He intended to do all along.*** He looks to heaven, offers up thanks to His heavenly Father, and then distributes the bread and fish to every single person there—every man, every woman, and every child. Everyone ate their fill, with enough left over to fill twelve big baskets (like laundry baskets).

And the really sad thing out of all this is the fact that many of those 5,000 people who were on the receiving end of such real and tangible divine providence and goodness ***only saw what they wanted to see.*** They were blind to reality. They didn't see the miracle (the Greek word here is *seimion* – "sign") as proof and evidence of God's almighty presence and interaction with them. They didn't see it when Jesus turned water into wine. They didn't see it when Jesus healed the temple official's son by simply speaking the word. They didn't see it when Jesus healed a man who had been a paralytic invalid for 38 years. They didn't see any of it. In this particular case they only saw a great "bread vending machine."

St. John tells us that the people ***did*** see Jesus as the promised Messianic Prophet in the flesh, based on this miracle that they had just experienced, but that promised Messiah meant nothing more to them than the ***purveyor and supplier of earthly bounty and instant/complete gratification.*** Jesus is telling them, "*No, that's not what the Messiah is all about. I'm not here to simply fill your bellies,*" **and they ignore it.** They won't settle for "no." They want to seize Jesus by force. They want to MAKE Him be their bread king. He will serve them whether He likes it or not! It's incredibly sad. Jesus was nothing more than a genie in a lamp; a vending machine. Put in your request, pull the lever, and out comes the desired prize. They just didn't get it.

Now, I would hope that the parallels between all these different folks and the reflection in the mirror aren't eluding you. I know you're all pretty sharp in your faith, and I don't think anyone here is ***too proud or too ignorant*** to not recognize the sad fact that our sinful fruits don't fall far from the sinful tree of our forefathers. Yes, we grumble and complain too, in spite of all the many reasons we have to be thankful. Yes, we do sometimes treat God as if He's our magical genie. "*Your wish is my command.*" Sometimes we do treat prayer as if it's a ***magic spell***, as if we can simply regurgitate the words and manipulate God into doing our will. And—yes—we do sometimes look at all the ***signs and proofs*** God gives us that reveal His love and mercy and providence and care for us, ***and we're blind to all of it***...just like Old Testament Israel, just like the 5,000 recipients of God's grace and providence, and just like the apostles. We can be quite literally ***covered up*** in God's gracious providence and love, and yet we still look to heaven and ask, "*Why, God? Why have you forsaken me? Why am I being punished? Are*

you aware? Are you awake? Do you not see what I'm going through here? Do you not care? Give me a sign!"

[Ahem...turn around!] What are you looking for?! How much more do you need?! Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Here is Christ! Here is almighty God, right where He has promised to be! *"I am with you always, even to the very end of the age."* Guys: This promised presence of Christ isn't just some Hallmarky-Lifetime Channel-Sentimental kind of thing. ***It's real and tangible.*** Here [Word and Sacraments] is Christ Jesus! Here is the Bread of Life. ***Here is God, really, truly, tangibly, and in your very presence.*** Here is **proof-positive** of God's love and providence and grace for you! Christ lives, the victory's won, and here He is to bestow the fruits and spoils of His blood-bought victory on you.

I know you already know all this. I know it probably seems like I'm ***preaching to the choir***, and yet...we still wind up searching for some sort of sign and proof that God is present and active and cares about us when things get dark and scary and painful and out-of-whack, don't we? We still wind up looking for a sign, ***when we're literally covered up in the proof and presence of our gracious God and Lord; our Immanuel—God with us.*** Folks: I'll say it again: Here is Christ! Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Here is the Bread of Life. Here is your hope, your assurance, your eternal and unfailing peace. I can't ***make*** you see it, but by God's grace you ***can and will*** see it, just like all the faithful have since God first walked with and conversed with His beloved creation in the Garden.

May this Light—the Light of the world; the Light of Christ—shine forth in your life ever and always, and may you always recognize this Light...***and rejoice.*** No matter how bad things may get; no matter how bad things may seem; no matter how dark life may get, the Light of God's Love shines forth. God loves you unconditionally, and your sins are completely forgiven. ***Here's the proof!*** *[the crucifix]* May this Christ-centered reality be all you ever need or seek for ***peace and assurance.*** May this Christological reality give you peace; a peace that surpasses all understanding and is known only in faith, and may this peace of Christ be and remain with you now and into all eternity.

AMEN