

**1** We're continuing our worship series this morning, "Life Beyond Belief." God is inviting each one of us into a journey of change, a journey in which our belief in Jesus propels us into following Jesus, living the love of God out loud. And by the way, when Jesus said, "Follow me," he didn't mean that we should subscribe to his Twitter feed. He meant that this business of following is something we are to do actively, all in, with passion and energy. God is calling us to a life beyond belief, leaning into the mission of Jesus, and it can be the adventure of a lifetime. Along the way, God sometimes provides us with signs, like the ones given to the author of this story from *Our Daily Bread*:

*The road was smooth and we were making good progress as we headed for Jay's dad's house in South Carolina. As we drove through the mountains in Tennessee, I began seeing detour signs. But Jay kept going, so I assumed that they didn't apply to us. Shortly before we reached the North Carolina border, we came to a sign that said the highway ahead was closed due to a rock slide. We would have to turn around. Jay was surprised. "Why wasn't there any warning?" he wanted to know. "There were lots of warnings," I said. "Didn't you see the signs?" "No," he said, "why didn't you mention them?" "I assumed that you saw them," I answered. We now tell this story to entertain our friends!*

Our lives can be like that road trip. God provides all the signs we need, and we either miss them or don't want to believe them. And what about stopping the metaphorical car of our life to ask God for directions? Is it OK to ask God for a sign when we don't know where to go? This morning we'll seek some answers from the Bible as we seek to move beyond Signs and Sin.

**2** The Bible is full of examples of God providing signs of divine power and intention. The first High Priests wore objects in their breast plates, possibly stones, that they used sort of like a magic eight ball, answering yes or no questions.<sup>2</sup> Gideon invented a system for testing God's will that involved a wool fleece and the morning dew.<sup>3</sup> Our earlier reading from 1Kings was all about how the Queen of Sheeba payed careful attention to the God-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://odb.org/2011/04/12/pay-attention-to-signs/>

<sup>2</sup> e.g., Exodus 28:30, Number 27:21

<sup>3</sup> Judges 6:37

given signs in King Solomon's life, signs that made it clear to her that he was blessed by God with wisdom and great wealth. Our Early Word message concerned the story of Jonah and the big fish, a story of some different kinds of signs. These last two Old Testament accounts in particular are back stories that Jesus would have wanted you to know as we read our Gospel account today from Luke, chapter 11, verses 29 to 32 in the New Living Translation.

**{Read Luke 11:29-32, NLT}.**

**3** This is definitely not one of those passages in the Bible that give us a warm feeling of being loved by God and that everything is going to be ok. In a way, we're kind of jumping into the season of Lent early, with all this talk of sin, judgment day, and repentance. What does Jesus mean by "the sign of Jonah," what's got Jesus so riled up here, and how do we fit into this picture?

The sign of Jonah probably points to more than one thing. Readers usually assume that Jesus is talking about his future death and resurrection. In fact, Matthew even spells that out explicitly in his account of this teaching: "For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights."<sup>4</sup> But there is a more immediate, more ironic meaning, especially here in Luke's Gospel. Note that both Jonah and Jesus were prophets of God sent to foreign cities with messages of repentance (i.e., turn away from your wicked, self-serving ways and turn toward holy, God-centered ways). Jonah's preaching to the Ninevites, not his adventure with the big fish, was the sign from God to the Ninevites that led to their repentance and their subsequent deliverance from God's judgment. The irony in Luke is that the preaching of Jesus to the crowd is itself the sign of Jonah, and like the friends driving past the detour signs on the highway, the crowd gathered around Jesus simply assumes the signs don't apply to them.

**4** Jesus was fed up because he knew that no number of miraculous signs would be enough to change the hard hearts of the people demanding that he prove himself. So perhaps asking God for a sign isn't itself sinful, so much as harboring an unbelieving heart. Jennifer

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 12:40, NLT.

Fulwiler shares this revealing story of asking God for a sign:

*A couple days after I started this blog I went on vacation to... New Mexico. The subject of God was very much on my mind. For the first time in my life I was open to the idea that God might exist — or, at least, trying to be open to the idea — but I felt lost and confused and didn't know where to turn. I was becoming increasingly dejected that I didn't seem to be getting anywhere spiritually. I didn't feel God's presence, I wasn't basking in the warm feelings of Jesus' love for me. I didn't feel... anything. And it didn't seem like I ever would.*

*The second night we were there .... I felt like I was hitting a spiritual rock bottom, so I begged God to help me. I begged him for a sign to let me know he exists. [A]round three o'clock in the morning I decided to get out of bed and go sit on the balcony. Our room boasted a spectacular view of the Southern Rocky Mountains, looking out at two huge peaks. When I stepped outside I was stunned to see a storm raging silently between the two mountains. The only sound was the rustling of a mild breeze as the lightning flashed brilliantly to illuminate the great cloud, probably a hundred miles away. It must have been 60,000 feet tall with raging winds, battering the ground below with rain or hail... An artist wouldn't have painted it as such because it would seem too contrived. The rest of the sky was completely clear, and packed with stars.*

*Just as I looked up to try to pick out some constellations, a large meteor sparkled across the sky. Then another. I saw probably eight in total that night, many of them large with long, dazzling trails. It was breathtaking... "Well, " I smirked to myself, "be careful what you wish for." I had asked for a sign, and this was about as "sign-ish" as it gets. What more did I want? Yet I wasn't convinced. Even as my heart raced upon witnessing the grandeur before me I wrote it off as just a storm and an unexpected meteor shower. I refused to believe that there was anything more to this than a random cumulonimbus and some dust entering the earth's atmosphere. I realized then that there was no sign that God could give me. If this wouldn't suffice, nothing would.... I realized that night that I wasn't going to see God if I was determined not to.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> <http://jenniferfulwiler.com/2009/08/asking-god-for-sign/>

What's the state of your heart this morning? Are you still looking for proof where your faith belongs? Is your faith, no matter how small or weak, open enough to see and believe the signs of God around you? When you ask God for a miracle, are you asking for something that's consistent with the Word of God and the mission of Jesus, or are your motivations somewhere else?

Some of the people asking Jesus for signs simply wanted another meal of bread and fish.<sup>6</sup> Some of them, like Herod, were probably thrill seekers, wanting to be entertained by something spectacular.<sup>7</sup> Living in the fullness of God requires us to repent, to move beyond our sin, and even beyond our need for signs. Only in repentance and faith was Jonah able to preach to the Ninevites. Only in repentance and faith can we, like the Apostle Paul, pray for "signs and wonders," for the sake that others might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.<sup>8</sup>

**5** Living beyond belief requires us to foster a faith that allows us to take confident action, neither timidly waiting for a telegram from God nor insisting that God continually provide demonstrations of divine power. Last year was a great year of breakthroughs for our church, a year marked by prayer and boldly stepping out in faith into new ministries. This year can be a year of breakthroughs as well: a year of continuing to move beyond the status quo and reclaiming the passion of being all-in for Jesus, sold-out followers of the King of Glory; a year of living beyond belief, bringing and being the Good News of Jesus to more and more lost and hurting people. That's the mission of Jesus, and so that's our mission as well.

Every faith-stretching journey toward a transformed life begins with one small step. Your challenge this week is a personal one, just between you and God. Write a letter to God or a journal entry and reflect on either one attitude or behavior that you know displeases God and you'd like to leave behind you, or one way you'd like to take a risk for God, relying on faith and not sight. But don't stop with the writing. Once you know what your step is, then go and live it!

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<sup>6</sup> John 6:26

<sup>7</sup> Luke 23:8

<sup>8</sup> Romans 15:19



# *Buffalo United Methodist Church*



*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*

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