

## THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT March 18 & 19, 2006

### St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

#### GIVE US A SIGN! Matthew 12:38-42

A weeping icon. A bleeding statue. Every so often you will read or hear about on TV some abnormal happening such as an icon in a church that has tear stains on it or a statue of Jesus or of the Virgin Mother that appears to be bleeding. When these out of the ordinary events occur, it draws crowds of people both believers and skeptics. There are those who want to believe that this is a supernatural happening. There are also those who come to prove that this is a hoax.

Why do signs and abnormal happenings attract people and why do people often look for special signs to prove in some way or back up what they believe? In the Word of God before us for our study and consideration today we have such an incident where the Pharisees and teachers of the law are seeking special signs from Jesus. This event occurred about one year before Jesus' death. It was around the Passover and Jesus' enemies were attempting to discredit him and ruin his reputation with the people. They go to Jesus and say, **GIVE US A SIGN.** We will take their request as the theme for our meditation. Let's consider **I) Why Do People Want Signs?** and then look at **II) The Signs That God Gives.**

#### WHY DO PEOPLE WANT SIGNS?

Have you ever thought, "If only Jesus would appear right now and show this person that he is real?" "If only the Lord would perform some spectacular miracle so that these people could really see he does have power." "If only I could have some sign from God that what I am doing is right." "If only Jesus would show that I should have these treatments or not." There are times when we too look for signs.

Why do we want signs? Sometimes words are not enough. We want to see some proof. In fact, in life we have learned that words are cheap. People tell you one thing and then do just the opposite. People tell you what they think you want to hear but have no intentions on following through with what they have said. We have all heard the statement, "Actions speak louder than words." We want to be able to see something with our own eyes. That is one of the reasons that we often look for signs.

It's very interesting as you read the twelfth chapter of Matthew. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law have been trying to trap Jesus and show that he has been breaking the Law of Moses. Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath whose hand had been withered. He then heals many sick and diseased people who were brought to him. Later the people bring to Jesus a man who had been possessed by a demon and was also mute and blind. Jesus drove the demon from the man and also restored his sight and speech. The religious leaders accused Jesus of doing this by the power of the devil. After they had seen these miracles, they now approach Jesus and say, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." (v. 38) Wait a minute! Jesus had just performed many healings and driven a demon out of one person. What more did they want? Weren't these healings signs enough for them?

It appears that the miracles that Jesus had performed were not enough for these religious people. They wanted something more spectacular. Jesus, do something that will impress us and then we will believe you and follow you. Listen to what Jesus says to them, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign.” (v. 39a) Jesus calls these people wicked and adulterous. They had rejected him as the promised Savior of the world; they were looking for someone else. The god they were worshiping was not the true God and so Jesus refers to them as adulterous. Their relationship was not with the God of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was with a false god that did not exist. They refused to believe what Jesus had said and they rejected the miracles that he had done and they had seen with their own eyes.

Their actions are a sad commentary on human beings. We are never satisfied. We always want bigger and better signs. We want something more spectacular. We want something that will really grab our attention and keep it. Is there such a thing? No. Just look at various attractions and amusement parks. Do they always remain the same? No. They are continually adding new rides, changing their configurations otherwise they become old hat and people go on to look for something new and better.

### **THE SIGNS THAT GOD GIVES**

Well, what signs has God given us? Listen to Jesus’ words, “But none will be given it expect the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Vv. 39b-40) The sign of course that Jesus is referring to is his burial and resurrection. Well what did the religious leaders do with that sign? Matthew tells us that after Jesus had risen from the dead, the guards who had seen the event went into the city and told the chief priests and elders what had happened. The priests then gave the guards this instruction, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while were asleep.’ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” (Matthew 28:13-14) They refused to believe that sign and spread lies that contradicted the truth of the resurrection of Jesus.

But what was the thing that had changed the hearts of the people of Nineveh when Jonah finally got there and proclaimed to them, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”? (Jonah 3:4b) It was the Word of God. It was not some spectacular sign. It was the almighty word of God that led these people to repent, to turn from their sinful ways to the Lord God of Israel. We heard the King of Nineveh proclaim, “Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” (Jonah 3:8-9)

Jesus then says that the people of Nineveh will rise up and condemn these people in the judgment for they repented at the preaching of Jonah. It was not some sign that Jonah performed that caused this great turning from sin to the Lord. It was the proclamation of the Word of God.

Jesus then cites the example of the Queen of the South (of Sheba) who came to visit Solomon to find out if he was as wise and wealthy as the reports she had heard. After questioning the king and listening to his answers and observing all that Solomon possessed, she said, “I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I have heard.” (I Kings 10:7-8) Jesus then says, “now one greater than Solomon is here.” (v. 42c) He tells the Pharisees and teachers of the law that the Queen of the South will rise up and condemn them in the judgment. For when she saw with her eyes what she had heard about Solomon

she believed. But these people when they saw Jesus listened to him and saw the miracles he performed still did not believe and asked for greater signs.

What signs do you and I have? We have the sign of the empty grave. What does that grave proclaim to us? It assures us that Jesus who died on that cross and announced that he was forsaken by God was forsaken for us and God accepted his payment for our sins. We are pardoned. One day our own graves will be empty as we rise from the dead. We have listened to Jesus speak to us and we have heard his great wisdom. We have heard him tell us how much he loves us. We have heard him assure us that nothing will be able to snatch us out of his hands. We rest securely in him.

What kind of signs are these? They are not spectacular signs in the sky. They are not earthquakes that shake us and the foundations of the earth. They are the words and promises of our God. God has spoken to us in his word and in the life, death and resurrection of his only Son, Jesus Christ. These are the only signs we need. Unfortunately, we are children of our times and we too often want something more spectacular. Something where we are able to say, "I saw this with my own eyes." But remember what Abraham said to the rich man in the story that Jesus told of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man wanted Abraham to send him or someone else back from the dead to warn his brothers so that they wouldn't end up in hell with him. Abraham said, "they have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:29 & 31)

God has given us signs. They are the signs of his Word. There is the empty tomb on Easter. There is the risen Savior who is with us everyday of our life. There is the promise that he will provide for us and protect us. People's words may not mean what they say, but God's Word is entirely different. Every promise he has made to you and me, he keeps. What other signs do we need?

Amen.