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“Asking for A Sign”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021

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Scriptures: Isaiah 7: 10-14 Mark 11: 1-11; 14: 1-9

Isaiah 7: 10-14

¹⁰ Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. ¹³ Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.”

Mark 11: 1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.

⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Mark 14:1-9

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; ² for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

³ While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴ But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. ⁶ But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷ For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness

to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 9 Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Asking for a Sign

The year is around 734 BCE.
The king of Judah is King Ahaz.
Ahaz is caught up in a foreign policy crisis.

Syria and Palestine joined together to oppose a mightier nation, Assyria,
and invited their smaller, southern neighboring nation Judah
to be on their side.

King Ahaz of Judah refused their invitation.
Now, suddenly, unexpectedly, to everyone’s surprise,
the anger of Syria and Palestine is directed at him.
They plan to move against Jerusalem and Judah,
fully intending to replace King Ahaz
with someone more favorable to their policies.

While the Prophet Isaiah was at Judah, in the house of King Ahaz,
as he sat at table,
suddenly, unexpectedly, to everyone's surprise,
maybe even to his own surprise,
Isaiah broke open his heart.
He redirected the conversation from the secular to the spiritual.

Here they are, in the midst of political upheaval,
caught up in a foreign policy crisis,
no one sure what tomorrow will bring,
and God’s follower insists that what is really going on
is a crisis of faith, a crisis of lack of trust in The Faith.

While the King is counting swords and checking the walls,
Isaiah begins testifying that faith in God is sufficient,
that God’s grace is sufficient,
assuring the high and mighty
that the Big Love of God will save, will deliver,
will easily pass any test
the doubting King sets before the Lord.

What had begun as a casual dinner with fear in the air

suddenly became holy.
What started simple became sacred,
transforming into what we call an experience of *Kairos*.
Clearly Isaiah's breaking open of his heart, his faith,
was an event, a happening, something to remember,
something to share again and again.

Listen closely to their conversation, as recorded in Isaiah 7:

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying,
Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.

But Ahaz said,

I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.

Then Isaiah said:

Hear then, O house of David!

Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.

*Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son
and shall name him Immanuel. --Isaiah 7: 10-14*

--observe that here we see that the King knows the Word,
quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16, "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*"--

--notice as well that we witness the King quoting scripture, standing behind scripture
to refuse to acknowledge the validity of the demand of faith—

--Isaiah notices, observes the delays and denials of Ahaz, and plows on--

Isaiah offers a divine vision to Ahaz and all at the table,
offering what we call an oracle.

He proclaims a prophecy, a spiritual prediction of what shall come to pass:

You have not asked for a sign, so God will give one to you.

*A child shall be born of a young woman, and she shall name Him Immanuel.
God with us.*

In time the foreign policy threat from Syria and Palestine is abated
yet in due time bad tidings come upon King Ahaz,
tidings for being foolish, for thinking he was autonomous,
for not trusting, following, seeking first the ways of the Lord.

This prophetic sign of God's future Messiah
was given to Ahaz and all who sat the table,
even over and against the will of King Ahaz,
just as it would be given against the will of King Herod,
and Pilate after him,
and any and all who wield power and authority

yet by their words and actions
attempt to evade the demands of The Faith,
who refuse to submit their policies to the claims of faith,
who prefer to act and put their faith
in their own foolish autonomy.

Isaiah, at the table, lays it on the table:
If you will not ask God for a sign of support,
a sign of whether the path you choose is The Way,
that's fine.

Be aware, shared Isaiah, and be blessed:
God shall send the world a sign.
Even without asking, God will send us a Living Hope, a sign of the power of Love.
God's Sign will be born of a young woman, whom she named Immanuel,
whom we know as Jesus Christ.

Asking for a Sign

During Passover, while Jesus Christ was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper,
as he sat at the table,
suddenly, unexpectedly, to everyone's surprise,
maybe even to her own surprise,
a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard.

She broke open the jar,
and in an act of generosity, grief, and gratitude,
poured the ointment on Jesus' head.
Conversation stopped.

Simon, the disciples, followers and casual lookers-on
ceased their dinnertime chit-chat to watch.
They watched as she anointed Jesus with pure nard.
The fragrance of the costly perfume filled the room and filled their senses.
They knew the smell, the fragrance, the aroma.
It reached into their memory banks,
reconnecting them with pleasant memories from their pasts.
They sensed, and they remembered.
The room was still.

What had begun as a casual meal among friends became holy.
What started simple became sacred,
transforming into what we call an experience of *Kairos*.
Between the sudden compulsion to serve,
the shock of a pound of costly perfume being opened,
the fragrance that filled their common space,
and the woman's act of devotion and love,

clearly this was an event, a happening, something to remember,
something to share again and again.

Yes, love of God originally brought them together in Simon's home.

Yet this expression of devotion, of service above self, of love
lifted them to a whole new place, a new dimension, a new spirituality,

They observed an act of charity like they'd never seen before,
one so sacrificial, so sensual, so out of the ordinary
it caused powerful emotions to come to the forefront.

For some present, the anointing brought tears to their eyes.

Some looked at the floor, or out the window.

Some smiled and reflected on Jesus' gratitude.

Some became upset; their anger, animosity, and angst targeted outward.

"Why was the ointment wasted in this way?"

And then they scolded her...

...refusing to acknowledge the validity of faith, of beauty, of deep enlightenment.

Jesus said, *"Let her alone; why do you trouble her?"*

She has performed a good service for me.

For you always have the poor with you,

and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish;

but you will not always have me.

She has done what she could;

she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.

Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world,

what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Jesus Christ's prophecy was on target.

"...wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world,

what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

She is the living sign Jesus may have been asking for,

a sign that He is loved, that all is not for naught, that God is nigh.

She is the sign we have been asking for, as well.

Whenever God's people begin asking for a sign,

we retell

tales of the faithful who speak truth

to the powerful when they lose their way and are lead astray;

we recall the breaking open of hearts and minds;

we remember the souls breaking open of jars of expensive ointment;

we do this in remembrance of the One

who broke of the Bread, at the Lord's Table,

for the sake of love.

Ah, when the practical collides with the holy,
wherever the sacred and the service blend,
we remember and revere
a prophet's challenge to a king,
a woman's story of love, grace, tangible spirituality,
a Messiah's faithful journey from manger to the Cross.
Immanuel, God with us, indeed.

When it comes to a sign of confirmation that God loves us, what more need we ask?

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!