



LAKESWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sign of The Times

Matthew 16: 1-12

16 The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus^[a] they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ² He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' ³ And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.^[b] ⁴ An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." Then he left them and went away.

The Yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees

⁵ When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶ Jesus said to them, "Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ⁷ They said to one another, "It is because we have brought no bread." ⁸ And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, "You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? ⁹ Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹ How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!" ¹² Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

I wonder if you remember the M. Night Shyamalan movie SIGNS that came out around the turn of the century. The movie follows Graham Hess, a former Episcopal priest who has lost his faith after his wife dies in a tragic accident. He lives on a farm with his two children and his brother Merrill. One morning, enormous crop circles appeared in his fields. As strange events multiply, the family begins to suspect that something extraordinary is happening and eventually discovers that Earth is being invaded by

extraterrestrials. OK, some of you just rolled your eyes. Hang in there. The movie's deeper question isn't really "Are aliens coming?"

The big question is, are these events random, or do they mean something?

The characters in the movie are provided with many events that could be seen as signs, and they try to figure out what they mean. Graham's question is, are these signs coincidence or are they given for a greater reason.

Perhaps from God? This moment sets up the film's exploration of faith, coincidence, and the search for meaning.

Some of us have been in that place when we need a sign from God, to help provide meaning. We may be in a place of doubt, a place of anxiety or fear, we may have experienced a tragedy, and we ask God for a sign that all will be ok.

Some of us see God in everything. Someone provides a word of kindness, a rainstorm clears to a beautiful sunset, maybe you met someone at exactly the right moment. Maybe a door unexpectedly opened. Maybe something you thought was a disaster eventually became the very thing God used to redirect your life. We see it as a sign from God.

Most of the time these signs appear after an event, and we consider it a confirmation from God that things are as they should be. This morning's passage starts with a conversation that Jesus has with some religious leaders that want a sign. Not to confirm God's action, not bring a sense of meaning, but to test Jesus.

We are in Matthew chapter 16. For the next three weeks until the end of the month, we will be in this chapter, so feel free to bookmark it and have a look over it before the next few weeks.

In the preceding chapters, Jesus has been on the east side of the sea of Galilee which was considered Gentile territory. He has been teaching and healing, there are two miraculous feeding stories, he feeds 5000 in one and 4000 in another. In other words, Jesus is making an impact. He is changing

lives. Word is spreading about this man. These people are starting to wonder who he may be. Some are concluding that he may be the promised Messiah. The religious leaders are getting antsy. Twice in the preceding chapters we read of the Pharisees and teachers of the law approaching him and challenging him.

At the end of Chapter 15 we read that Jesus gets in a boat and goes to the vicinity of Magadan, which on the over side of the sea and would have been Jewish territory. Once again religious leaders approach Jesus.

This chapter in many ways is a turning point in the Gospel and the ministry of Jesus. Until now most of his teaching has been for the people. After this he starts to prepare his disciples for what is coming. He teaches them about his death, his betrayal, the end of the age. He is preparing them for life without him.

The first thing Matthew tells us as Jesus returns to Jewish territory is that he is approached by the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They ask Jesus to show them a sign from heaven. They are not doing this to find out more about Jesus or to experience something marvelous of God. They are doing this to test him. They are trying to trip him up. Remember this does not happen in a vacuum; Jesus has just fed 4000 people with 7 loaves and a few fish. Just before that he healed the Canaanite woman's daughter. I am sure they have heard of these acts. They do not really need a sign.

Now before we get to Jesus' response, the phrase "The Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus," is interesting, because they didn't really get along. What we know about them from the ancient commentators of the time leads us to believe that they would not normally hang out. The Pharisees were the keepers of the law. That is why they challenged Jesus so much when they thought he was threatening the law. They lived fairly modest lifestyles, but in terms of the law, oral and written, they were probably considered very conservative. They debated and discussed what the law meant, never questioned its authority and lived by it. They believed in angels, demons, resurrection of the body. The Sadducees were on the

other extreme. Theologically they were the liberals. They did not believe in the Oral law, or angels or bodily resurrection. They ran the temple and lived luxurious lives, they were heavily involved in politics, hung out with Gentiles which Pharisees did not do. They were in opposition. There is not much that would have brought them together. They would have put up with each other in the Sanhedrin, but nowhere else. Until Jesus. They were both so upset about Jesus and his teaching that this brings them together.

So, they ask for a sign from heaven.

Jesus responds, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' ³ And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."

You know growing up in Scotland we would say, "Red Sky at night, Shepherds delight, Red sky in the morning Shepherds warning." Then I moved to the USA and you guys say, "Red Sky at night.....

Shepherd or Sailor, who knows which came first, but we can see that this phrase has been in use since the days of Jesus.

But they want to see a sign, yet what they don't get is that they are talking to the sign. Jesus himself is the sign. Remember when he presented in the temple and Simeon says to Mary and Joseph, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed. Jesus is the sign, he is the one who has been predicted by the prophets, he is the central figure of God's redemptive history. He is the Messiah. He is the sign of God's redemption. They miss it.

Jesus tells them they cannot discern the signs of the times. This is not chronological time Matthew speaks of. This is Kairos time, which is a description of the seasons, the eras. This is the season of redemption. The Signs of the Times have been happening all around them. God has been active, Jesus has been active, that is the Sign of the times. He tells them the only sign they will receive is the sign of Jonah. The sign of Jonah is explained

in Chapter 12, Jesus' resurrection after 3 days, just like Jonah's return from the belly of the fish after 3 days is the sign of Jonah. He is speaking of his resurrection. That is the sign they will be given.

The problem isn't that God hasn't given them enough information.

The problem is that they're refusing to recognize what God has already given them.

We then read that when they had travelled across the lake, the disciples had forgotten to bring bread. Jesus says to them, Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees."

The disciples initially misunderstood Him. They thought Jesus was talking about physical bread. Jesus, responds, Guys, you just saw me feed 5000 and then 4000, why are you talking about lack of bread? You of little faith. Then he says again be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisee and the Sadducee.

A little yeast can affect an entire lump of dough. In the same way, a small amount of hypocrisy, pride, or unbelief, false teaching, can spread through a person's heart and eventually affect their whole life.

What is great, is that he is talking about both sides of the theological divide of the time, in Jewish religious society. The Conservatives and the Liberals. We do not all think the same way theologically here at LPC, yet we are able to come together and worship as one. That is a cool thing. But whether you are theologically conservative or liberal, you should hear Jesus' challenge in these words.

We must be careful about what we allow to shape our thinking. Not everything that sounds spiritual is biblical. Not every popular message is a godly message. Not every person who carries a Bible is faithfully teaching the Word.

We need discernment. We are all under the influence of someone.

The Bible tells us to test what we hear and compare it with God's Word. We should ask: Does this teaching exalt Christ? Does it agree with Scripture? Does it produce holiness, humility, love, and obedience?

Because whatever we repeatedly allow into our hearts will eventually influence how we live.

Jesus' warning for his disciples is a good word for us. The Pharisees and Sadducees missed the sign right in front of them. Missed what God was doing in the life of Jesus, and Jesus warns them not to be like them. Do not let their influence corrupt you.

Jesus is still active in the world, still moving us toward the Kingdom of God, we often miss it. If you haven't seen the movie I mentioned at the start, here's the spoiler, the signs that experienced by the characters were not random, they had purpose, they meant something. Faith is restored at the end when it all comes together.

I admit this movie is not the greatest analogy, but God is still moving in ways to bring things together. To bring God's kingdom.

We can spend our lives asking God for a sign while missing the signs of what God is doing in our midst. Let us not be like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Do not allow the yeast of pride, hypocrisy, unbelief, or false teaching to enter your heart.

Look around, look for the signs of our times. Look for what God is doing, be a part of it. And keep your eyes on the one who is the sign that God's redemptive work is still in full motion. Keep your eyes on Christ. Amen.