

# SHOW US A SIGN

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**JOHN 2:13-22; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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I want to start off with a little exercise. I have a number of images on the screen and I want you to tell me what each of these images represents.

We'll start easy. ☺

1. Calgary Flames
2. Canada
3. United Nations
4. Breast Cancer Awareness
5. Doctor/Health Care Professional (Moses lifting up a staff in the wilderness to cure the people of poisonous snake bites – whoever looked at the staff lived [Numbers 21])
6. Red Cross
7. Olympics
8. Medicine Wheel (cycles of Nature, interdependence, relationships between different nations)
9. Mennonite Church Canada (dove, story of Noah, peace, security, provision of God)
10. MCC (again, symbolism of the dove combined with the cross)
11. LMC Easter Cross (life coming out of a symbol of execution)
12. LMC communion elements (bread, juice, grapes)
13. Cross in a slum south of Bogota, Colombia

These images function like *signs* in that direct our attention to something else, something beyond the sign itself, right? Whether something as trivial as a professional hockey team or something as significant as a cross on Easter Sunday, the sign calls our minds to a bigger reality.

The sign may even trigger emotional reactions in us. The Calgary Flames symbol, for example, triggers in me the memory of a glorious spring day in 1989 when a fourteen-

year-old boy saw his favourite hockey team defeat the hated Montreal Canadiens and lift their one and only Stanley Cup.

Or, the cross in the slum in Bogota always brings me back to the horrendous conditions that we saw human beings living in, and the hope that emerged among the people there, even when things looked desperate.

Perhaps some of these other signs trigger memories or associations in your mind as well. Maybe the pink ribbon makes you think of someone you lost to cancer. Maybe the MCC logo brings to mind a trip that you once took.

**Signs point beyond themselves. Signs point to realities that affect us in big ways and are far bigger than the signs themselves.**

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What about this sign?

*[Jerusalem temple in the first century]*

What did this sign represent? What reality does it point to beyond the stones of the structure itself?

For the Jews, this temple was nothing less than the place where God dwelled.

It called to mind a long history of an ark with stone tablets coming out of the wilderness into the promised land...

And King David, the man after God's own heart...

And his son Solomon, who built the first temple....

And the destruction of that temple at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BC...

And the loss and longing of exile...

And the return from exile...

And the rebuilding of a temple that began with Ezra...

**The temple was the sign of Israel's God and this God's promises to them. Indeed, for many it was far *more* than a sign. It was the focal point of their religious, political, and social life.**

**It was the holiest place on earth.**

The temple was where all good Jews went for pilgrimages and important festivals. Like Passover, for example, as in our first text from John's gospel.

Passover would have been a time of pure chaos in Jerusalem. The city itself was probably small at the time – maybe 50 000 people or so. Smaller than Lethbridge!

But during Passover, which commemorated the Exodus out of Egypt, this number would at least triple in size.

We get a sense of the scene from today's text. The temple is a hive of activity with animals everywhere (for animals were required for sacrifice, and pilgrims who came from long distances would have had to purchase these in Jerusalem), as well as the noisy din of commerce.

Moneychangers would have been required because the Jewish temple required Jewish currency to buy animals for sacrifice. So, pilgrims would have had to exchange their Roman currency (remember, the Romans occupied Israel at this time) for Jewish coin. For a price of course.

So Jesus enters the temple. And he's not pleased by what he sees.

He fashions a whip and begins to drive the merchants and the livestock out of the temple.

*Stop turning my Father's house into a market!* he screams.

In the other gospels Jesus makes a contrast between the "house of prayer" the temple was supposed to be and the "den of robbers" it had been turned into.

But in John's version, Jesus uses the word "market," no doubt because of the temple tax and exchange rates that mercilessly drained the poor pilgrims of their funds.

At any rate, this is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This is the angriest we see Jesus in the gospels. And the Jewish authorities are, understandably annoyed by Jesus' actions. To put it mildly.

*What gives you the right?! they demand to know. Show us a sign to prove that you have the authority to do these things!*

Jesus responds, as he so often does, cryptically. He speaks in riddles.

*You want a sign?, he says. Fine, how's this for a sign. Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it again.*

The Jewish leaders laugh at this prospect. A temple that took long decades to build, rebuilt in three days. Ludicrous. The man is clearly as crazy as he looks, running around the temple with a whip in his hands.

But of course Jesus wasn't referring to the physical structure of the temple. John makes it clear that Jesus was foreshadowing, talking about his own life.

**About a destruction that would take place on a Roman cross and a rebuilding that would look like an empty tomb.**

When the Jewish leaders demanded to see a sign, the sign that Jesus gave him was himself. He described his *own body* as the temple, his own fate as more significant than the fate of the Jerusalem temple.

This is pretty shocking stuff! He's not after reform here, but abolition.

The terms we use are a bit misleading. We refer to the "cleansing" of the temple. But it's not as though Jesus thought that the temple system was basically ok, just a bit corrupt with all those nasty moneychangers taking advantage of pilgrims.

No, the whole system was corrupt. And its time was finished.

Karoline Lewis, professor at Luther Seminary in Minnesota, puts it like this:

Jesus is not quibbling about maleficence or mismanagement but calls for a complete dismantling of the entire system. Underneath this critique lies also the intimation that the temple itself is not necessary.<sup>1</sup>

And if the temple system isn't necessary? Well what will take its place? The symbolism is unmistakable. Again, I borrow the words of Lewis:

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2377](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2377)

If the temple symbolizes the location and presence of God, Jesus is essentially saying to the Jewish leaders that he is the presence of God. Where one looks for God, expects to find God, imagines God to be are all at stake for the Gospel of John. In Jesus, God is right here, right in front of you.<sup>2</sup>

This is far more than Jesus having a tantrum and decisively dealing with the corruption of the Temple system.

Like each of Jesus' signs, it is a profound statement about his identity as the Messiah, the place where God is most fully seen and experienced. As God himself in human form.

The sign points beyond itself.

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Of course, we know that what Jesus spoke about in metaphors to the Jewish authorities in the temple would become much more than a metaphor.

*[Jesus' crucifixion slide]*

We know that the sign that Jesus promised would become a reality. The temple of God—Jesus' body would be destroyed. And rebuilt on the third day. This was the sign that proved that Jesus had the authority for his actions in the temple.

It has been the sign of God's presence and salvation in the world ever since.

**And it has never stopped seeming like a foolish sign, as Paul reminds us in our passage from 1 Corinthians.**

This is why Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 1:22-23,

<sup>22</sup> Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

Just as Jesus alluded to his own death and resurrection to a bunch of flabbergasted merchants in the Jerusalem temple as the sign of God's authority, so Paul holds up a crucified king in the heart of the Roman Empire a few decades after the events themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

This is the sign.

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So what?

It's interesting, perhaps, to learn about Jesus' judgment upon the temple system and about how he himself would come to be the place in which God's presence was most definitively located, about how God's new "temple" would be destroyed on the cross at Calvary and "rebuilt" three days later when the stone was rolled away and the tomb was found to be empty.

It's interesting, perhaps, to learn about Paul's proclamation of the "foolishness of God's wisdom" in this whole arrangement, about how God chooses the unexpected, undesirable, and weak things of the world to shame the wise and the strong.

But what does this mean for us, today?

I was thinking a lot about the demand for a sign this week.

I wonder, do we, too, say, "Show us a sign!"?

Show us something, do a trick, give us a show, prove that you're on our side! We'll believe in you, we'll follow you to the ends of the earth, Jesus. Just show us a sign!"

We want all kinds of signs.

Just get me out of this jam!

Just heal my loved one!

Just alleviate my doubts!

Just answer this prayer!

Just get me this promotion!

Just help my kid!

Just fill our church!

Just save us from our enemies, from the people who frighten us!

Just \_\_\_\_!

*If you could just make yourself a bit more obvious, God! If you could just leave no room for doubt. If you could just demonstrate your credentials!*

***I'm ready to believe, ready to follow, but I need you to be a bit more God-like, if you don't mind.***

*A little bit of supernatural oomph would be most appreciated. Something to silence the skeptics and reassure the faithful. Something irrefutable. Lightning bolts... Cured cancers... Something like that.*

Behind every human demand that God demonstrate himself lies the basic selfishness that is at the heart of all sin.

We want God to dance to our tune. We want a God who is useful—on *our* terms.

**We want to make sure that we're backing a winner when it comes to this faith/religion thing.**

Yet God refuses to slide nicely into the grooves that we would like him to. God's foolishness far wiser than our wisdom.

Sometimes God graciously responds to our request for a sign. We see this at various points throughout Scripture (Elijah and the prophets of Baal comes to mind... Or Jesus showing himself to Thomas after his resurrection).

But other times, not so much. In Matthew 12, the Pharisees say the same thing as the authorities in the temple said: "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you!"

And Jesus' response? Well, he changes the metaphor a bit, but his answer amounts to the same thing as in John 2:

"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Jesus' response to the demand for a sign is always the same: I *am* the sign.

The sign might look foolish. It might not look very wise or impressive. You might wish for a better one. But the sign is me.

The sign goes beyond religion and ritual, beyond impressive structures, beyond pious attempts to impress or please God. The sign points to a reality far bigger and deeper and truer than what you think you want from a God.

**The sign is a life. And a death. And a coming to new life. And a dragging of all creation along for the ride in God's grand narrative of redemption.**

You say, "Show us a sign!" Well, this is the sign.

And it is the one case where the sign *doesn't* point beyond itself.

**The sign is the reality.**

The sign is God himself, in Jesus Christ, beginning to make all things new.

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As I was putting the finishing touches on this sermon on Friday, a scene from Luke 23 came to my mind.

I thought of the two thieves on the cross with Jesus.

I thought about how so many of our responses to Jesus could be summed up in this one scene, this one moment.

One thief, like the Jewish authorities, like human beings down through the ages right up until the present, demands a sign.

"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" Come on, Jesus! Prove it!

And the other thief?

*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*

One thief demands a God who acts like Gods are supposed to act.

The other thief recognizes that there is something divine at work in this Jesus, and simply appeals to his mercy.

I very much doubt the second thief had his theological ducks in a row. I doubt he had much of an idea about how this whole Messiah thing worked. I doubt he knew much about Jesus' temple conversation with the authorities, about the symbolism of how Jesus was replacing the temple, and in dying inaugurating the kingdom of God.

I doubt he had any inkling that Jesus would burst forth from the grave three days after they gasped their last breaths on those crosses.

But he knew that somehow the God of heaven and earth was at work, fulfilling his purposes in this strange Saviour, hanging there beside him.

And he says, "remember me."

As we continue our Lenten journey toward Calvary and Easter Sunday, my prayer is that we would be people who do not hunger for signs that have more to do with us than with God, but who accept the sign that has been given.

A life. A death. A resurrection. God's foolishness for a world addicted to its own wisdom.

And that we would people who are bold and trusting enough to say, "Jesus, I accept the sign. Remember me."

Amen.

