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The Gospel of Luke
XXXIX. The Sign of Jonah & the Queen of the South
Luke 11:29-36

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Let's just start by saying this is not an easy passage. Three immediate questions spring to mind. What in the world is the "sign" of Jonah – we know the story of Jonah, but what is the sign of Jonah? Second question: who is the queen of the South and what did she have to do with Solomon? And third, all of that about the light, the lamp, and the eyes – especially that verse, "*Your eye is the lamp of your body.*" Think about that for a moment. A lamp projects light, but our eyes, according to modern ophthalmology, work by receiving light. How, then, can our eyes act as a lamp? This is not an easy passage.

But there are two things, right from the start, which will help us make sense of this passage, even before we get to those three questions. The first is to see that this passage is a continuation of the passage we read last week. Last week, we read of Jesus healing a man who had been made mute by a demon possession.¹ But the real focus of that passage was on how the crowd responded to that healing. The scribes and Pharisees claimed Jesus must be casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons. Jesus told them that not only were they wrong, but that they had made themselves into the enemies of God and were in danger of missing out on the coming of God's Kingdom. A second group within the crowd responded to the miracle by saying, in effect, "*Impressive, what else you got? Show us some more signs.*" Jesus told this group that they needed to get off the fence – that whoever, by now, was not with Jesus was actually, like the scribes and Pharisees, against Jesus. And then there was the third group, those who believed in Jesus – those believers who marveled at what Jesus had done, and whom Jesus then pronounced "blessed."

And then the second thing which will help us is to remember that Jesus is addressing these words of warning we have read to the people of God, to those already in covenant relationship with God, Israelites. These warnings in our passage are not addressed to those outside the faith, but to those who – like us – are already inside the faith. What we read in our passage this morning is not directed to the pagans, but to people like you and me.

Okay – long intro – let's dig in. "*When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.'*" So what is this sign of Jonah? To cut straight to the answer, it's not the whale and it's not Jonah fleeing to Tarshish. Rather it is the message Jonah was given by God to declare to the Ninevites – a call to repentance, lest the Ninevites be punished for their sins. Jonah, after all his adventures in disobedience, finally did what God had commanded him to do. He walked into

the great city and declared, “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*”² And to Jonah’s great despair, and to God’s even greater delight, all of Nineveh heeded this sign, this message from God, and repented. That is the sign of Jonah – this call to repentance. Jesus further highlights this when He continues: “*The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*” In other words, Nineveh repented when all they had was the preaching of Jonah, the worst prophet ever. But now, Jesus is saying, you have the very Son of God in your midst – and yet still you will not repent.

It is a strong warning to both Jesus’s enemies – the scribes and Pharisees – and to the Jesus fence-sitters in the crowd still looking for a little more proof before they will commit. Jesus is telling them, as Paul will later tell the Corinthians, that “*Now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*”³ Repent, Jesus is telling the crowd – turn your hearts and minds to me, and believe. That is what the sign of Jonah meant for that “evil generation.”

So what does the sign of Jonah mean for our generation? Again, remember that Jesus was addressing this warning, not to pagans, but to His own people. We are now God’s own people, as the church of Jesus Christ. So what we are to hear in this sign of Jonah this morning is a warning that we, too, need to take seriously the work of repentance in our lives, if we are to stay on course with Christ and with His Kingdom. That repentance, for Christians, is not something done once when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior – and then no more. Rather, as Martin Luther once put it, in the very first of his 95 Theses: “*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*”

We need the work of ongoing repentance in our lives always. Repentance means to examine our lives to discern where we are continuing to sin and “*fall short of the glory of God.*”⁴ As well as to then confess that sin to God, in order that we might be renewed and restored and redirected in our living by the ongoing gift of God’s grace towards us. If we don’t regularly practice this work of repentance, our lives quickly become like that car covered in mud and grime with the words “Wash Me” scraped on the back window. Because, for the most part, our daily sin is not very spectacular – we are not out there daily robbing banks and killing people. But we cannot let that fact lull us, dull us, into thinking that therefore we are not sinners anymore – or that our sins, being smaller and less spectacular, are of no consequence to God, the world, or ourselves. We cannot let the ordinariness of our daily sins convince us that we do not need the continual work of repentance. Because the little daily sins we do commit – whether by omission or commission – can actually prove in some ways even more damaging and deadly to our souls than the spectacular sins we hear about on the nightly news. Because our sins seem small by comparison, we can convince ourselves – wrongly – that we’re doing just fine in God’s eyes – even as our lives are drifting farther and farther away from God, in small and slow but steady steps, each and every day.

We can think of it like this. This is Skye Jethani, from one of his daily email devotionals:

In our increasingly divided culture, there is one thing that Americans still share in common – we all like to be comfortable. Our uncontested desire for comfort, however, has a dark side. Too

much comfort is not only harmful, it can be downright dangerous. For example, a recent FAA study found that pilots are losing critical flying skills because they are underchallenged by state-of-the-art planes that virtually fly themselves. Ironically, the push for safety through computer flying is leading to more accidents as pilots “abdicate too much responsibility to automated systems.”⁵

In the same way, putting our discipleship on autopilot – failing to attend to critical skills and operations that identify us as Christ’s disciples and keep us growing as Christ’s disciples, is also, as Jethani puts it, “*not only harmful, [but] downright dangerous.*” Repentance is what keeps us off of autopilot and on our toes before God. Repentance is what enables us to make course corrections before we become critically lost to Christ and to His Kingdom. Repentance – the sign of Jonah – examining our lives daily for sin, and confessing our sin to God – is what keeps us clean and clear and close to God, moving in the right direction always.

Next item – the queen of the South. Who in the world is the queen of the South, and what does it mean that she, too, according to Jesus, will rise up at the judgment of that generation? The story of the queen of the South – or as we perhaps better know her, the Queen of Sheba – comes indeed from the time of King Solomon. We find her story in I Kings 10 and II Chronicles 9. The Queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon, both of his reputation for great wealth, and also of his reputation for great wisdom. And so she came to Jerusalem to see for herself. After her time with Solomon, she said to him, “*The report was true that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom.*”⁶ In other words, she was impressed by his wealth, but what really captured her was that Solomon spoke to her the wisdom granted to him by God. Solomon spoke to her the Word of God. And in receiving the Word of God, the Queen of Sheba, the queen of the South, rejoiced.

Says Jesus to the crowd before Him, “*The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*” Jesus is warning the crowd of enemies and fence-sitters that they are in danger of missing the very Words of Life, being spoken to them from the mouth of God Himself in human flesh. For if Solomon was wise, Jesus is wisdom itself. Jesus is the Word of God. And to turn a deaf or disbelieving ear to that Word – like the scribes and Pharisees and fence-sitters – well, what is the opposite of life? That is the warning of the queen of the South to the crowds around Jesus – hear and heed the Word of God while you still can.

But what does the warning of the queen of the South say to us? Our problem may not be that we possess a deaf or disbelieving ear, like the enemies of Jesus in that crowd, on that day. But it may indeed be that we possess a distracted ear, a disinterested ear, a “don’t really have the Word of God as any kind of priority in my life right now” sort of ear. And that can be just as deadly. In Jesus Christ, we are given and made able to understand the very Word of Life, the very Word sent from God, the very Word of God. All that we need to know about how to live, what are lives are really all about – it’s all there in God’s Word. That Word is the key to the things which matter most to the deepest longings of our heart of hearts – the key to love, to joy, to fulfillment, to peace. To be disinterested in the Word of God, to allow ourselves to become distracted from that Word

by all the lesser words of mere mortals which daily assail us, is utter foolishness – the very opposite of Solomon’s wisdom. The Queen of Sheba was willing to bravely travel from the very ends of the earth just to hear God’s Word. How is it, then, that we – God’s people – find it too hard even to open the Bible and read it for ten minutes daily? Without that Word, we are living without wisdom. We are living without the Word of Life. We are living as though we were still lost.

So the example and warning of the queen of the South is a warning call for us to be far more passionate and intentional and focused in our study and pursuit of the Word of God. It is a call for a deepening of our daily desire and devotion to God and to the things of God. Here’s a parable, if you will. On the first day of a scuba diving class, the instructor went around the room, asking each student why he or she wanted to learn how to dive. A retired man, said he had always wanted to learn how to dive and that now, at last, he finally had the time. A young woman said all her friends were divers, and she was tired of always being the one left behind on the boat. And then a middle-aged man spoke up. He joked that he was going through a mid-life crisis, and that diving was a lot cheaper than a Corvette. Everybody laughed. And then he shared the real reason. He said:

I have lived above and on the water, and even in it, all my life, but I have never visited its depths. I have spent forty-two years skimming surfaces, merely wading, dabbling. Twenty feet under is as mysterious and dangerous to me as outer space. Fifty or sixty feet seems another galaxy. It is starting to trouble me, that I have lived this long, have traveled far above the water and far out on it but have never gone beneath it . . . I want to enter it. I want to immerse myself in it.⁷

It that how it has been – how it is even now – with us and the Word of God?

The queen of the South is a warning to us from Jesus that it is time to stop paddling about in the shallow end, wasting our time and wasting our lives lounging about on the superficial surfaces of faith and of God’s Word. It is time to dive deep. To immerse ourselves in the richness of the Word and Wisdom He has spoken to us – that our lives might begin to shine forth with the greater glory of our God.

Which is what that last bit about lamps, lights, and eyes is actually all about. We asked how an eye, which receives light, can act as a lamp, which projects light. Well, the answer, the key to this curious riddle is simply that the ancient world had a different understanding of how our eyesight works. The ancient world thought that the eye sees by sending out light to illuminate the object in front of it. The modern explanation is, of course, that we see by light entering into our eyes, and striking the retina, which connects to the optic nerve, and so forth. But the ancients thought that we see by light going out through our eyes and striking and illuminating the world outside of us. With this in mind, the riddle of these verses untangles very quickly.

“Your eye is the lamp of your body,” says Jesus – remember, light coming from inside our bodies, out through our eyes, illuming the world. *“When your eye is healthy,”* He continues, *“your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful*

lest the light in you be darkness.” What is He saying? He is saying to us that whatever is in our hearts and minds – our bodies – is going to be projected out to the world. If we are full of light, light will stream forth from us to illumine others. But if within our hearts and minds is darkness, then that is what we will be projecting to others, deepening the darkness already present in this world. And guess which one Jesus is telling us to be!

Again, if we have light within, specifically the Light of the One who is the Light of the World, then through us Jesus will be able to shine that Light of love and hope and salvation into and upon all those who walk in darkness. *“No one after lighting a lamp puts in a cellar or under a basket”* – by which Jesus is saying that He needs us, He needs you and me, to be the lamps through which His light can go out into the world. And how is it that we shall be, for Him, full of Light and therefore a lamp on a stand shining light out into the darkness of this world? Through the work of continual repentance – the sign of Jonah; and through the discipline of continually going deeper into the Word of God – the sign of the queen of the South.

It is a powerful promise, a powerful request from Jesus – that He needs us, seeks to use us who belong to His church in order to reach out into this world and bring light into the darkness of those who do not yet know Jesus. In fact, here is a little bit of Solomon’s wisdom, which so impressed the queen of the South – and we’ll close with this. Proverbs 20:27: *“The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord.”* May it always be so, in you and in me.

¹ Luke 11:14-28.

² Jonah 3:4.

³ II Corinthians 6:2.

⁴ Romans 3:23.

⁵ Skye Jethani, “Turn Off the Autopilot,” *With God Daily* email devotional from November 9, 2020.

⁶ I Kings 10:6.

⁷ Mark Buchanan, *The Holy Wild* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishing, 2003), pp. 186-187.