

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Eighth Sunday after Trinity, July 26, 2015

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 351, 19:1, 359, 398, 366:5.

Lessons: Exodus 19:16 – 20:3, Romans 10:12-17, Luke 16:19-31.

Sermon Text: Matthew 16:1-4.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What does it take to prove Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world? What does it take to prove to even one person that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior?

Two groups of people ganged up on Jesus to ask him to prove that he was sent from God.

Please listen as we talk about this history and then make application to your life as

THE PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES DEMAND A SIGN FROM JESUS

- 1. They claim to want to know, but don't really want to know.**
- 2. The Holy Scriptures, including Jonah, contain all the signs they will get.**

Even today people want signs from God. For example, they want signs that the world is ending – probably so they can be ready for it. They want proof that God exists. People want Bible prophecies explained. They want signs to guide their personal lives and decisions, which often leads to practicing superstitions such as fortune-telling.

But when it comes to religion, do people really want what they ask for? *“The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.”* Then comes Christ's reply to these two groups when they challenged him.

These were men who could not agree among themselves, but they were unanimous in their opposition to Christ. In the history about Saint Paul recorded in Acts we read that *“a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.)”* (Acts 23:7-8)

In our sermon text, one group is the Pharisees, legalists, with their unceasing insistence on obeying the details of Law and tradition; and the other is the Sadducees, rationalists, with their denial of large parts of the Old Testament and all those doctrines that did not suit their reason. At other times these two Jewish sects were never united, but for the purpose of resisting Christ they gladly unite their forces. In order to tempt him, they come together in a malicious, deceitful manner. In an arrogant way they request, they demand, a sign from heaven, but this is not the first time recorded in Scripture that they did this. Matthew records a similar example in chapter 12.

They demanded an answer but really didn't want one. They really wanted to tempt Jesus, not to be taught by him. They were looking for more excuses for their unbelief, and Jesus, as the very Son of God, knew exactly what was going on in their evil minds.

Demonstrations of divine power may impress people, but they never bring people to faith. Ten terrible plagues did not bring Pharaoh to faith in Moses' day, and fire from heaven did not convert King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to faith in the God of Israel. It is the Word of God which leads anyone to faith, as you heard in our Epistle lesson.

Their request would have sounded reasonable to the people, as though they wanted to establish Jesus as the Messiah, but their real reason was blasphemy. Under no circumstances did they intend to believe on him. Mark summarizes such attacks on Jesus in this way: ***"The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, 'Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it.'"*** (Mark 8:11-12)

They demanded a sign from heaven, pretending they were ready to be convinced. They claimed to want some other sign than what they already had. They had many signs already. Every miracle Christ performed was a sign. Even Nicodemus, who was himself a Pharisee, came to Jesus at night and said ***"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."*** (John 3:2 NIV)

But the miracles that Jesus chose to perform would not work to convince them. They had to have a sign of their own choosing. They despised those signs in which Jesus relieved the needs of the sick and those oppressed by sin.

It is appropriate that the proofs of divine revelation should be chosen by the wisdom of God, not by the changing ideas of men. The evidence that Jesus has given in his life and works on earth is sufficient to satisfy someone who is not prejudiced against Jesus, but Jesus did not intend to satisfy their vain demands.

Evidence that is given in Scripture is sufficient to satisfy an unprejudiced inquiry. In the parable in our Gospel lesson Jesus made it clear that ***"If [people] do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."*** (Luke 16:31) Jesus himself rose from the dead and not very many people were convinced that he was the Messiah.

They insisted on a sign from heaven. Perhaps they were even thinking of the kinds of signs that God had shown at the giving of the law on Mount Sinai: thunder, and lightning, and the voice of words from the clouds. But Jesus came with miracles of his choosing and with words from a human, God's Son made human.

Their goal was only to trap him and tempt him to sin, not to be taught by him. If he were to show them a sign from heaven in response to their demands, they would likely attribute it to his being in league with Satan. If he would not show them a sign now, that would be their excuse for not believing on him.

He condemns their overlooking of the signs they had. They were seeking for signs of the kingdom of God, when it was already among them.

To expose this, he comments on their powers of observation in other things, and he particularly speaks of natural means of forecasting of the weather. He says ***"When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."*** Many of the Jews were careful observers of the weather. They knew very well the common signs indicating fair and foul weather. Constant and careful watching had taught them to regard a murky and lowering morning sky as a sign of an approaching rainstorm, while a red sunset caused them to expect fine weather for the next day. Perhaps you have heard this aphorism as "red sky at morning, sailor take warning, red sky at night, sailor delight." There are common rules drawn from observation and experience by which it is easy to very probably forecast what the weather will be like. Nature is quite consistent with itself. We do not know ***"the balancing of the clouds"*** (Job 37:16), but we may guess at something from the appearances of the clouds.

But although they had skill in observing the signs of the weather; they had only dullness and ignorance in spiritual matters! They did not know the times of God's coming to them. (Luke 19: 44) They did not recognize, and refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah, in spite of the many signs and wonders he had done in their midst. And so the signs of his entire ministry, of his life and death, which were originally intended to invite them into the kingdom of God, would now serve to harden their hearts all the more, thus bringing about their damnation. Jesus tells them: ***"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah."***

Christ and Christianity meet with opposition everywhere. We may find the same kind of opposition to us today, when we speak of the truths of God's Word and because we seek to speak all the truth of God's Word.

Many are not aware of what their end will be for rejecting Christ. Humans like to think – if they believe in the hereafter at all – that all will go to “a better place” after they die. That is simply not true. The options at death are immediately heaven or hell, and the only way to get to heaven is through faith in Jesus Christ as your personal savior. That is a message you have heard, learned, and hold dear. That is a message you are to give to others, to proclaim to those people closest to you and to those with whom you are in contact and ultimately to the rest of the world!

Jesus makes reference to the sign of Jonah. That is a repetition of what he said several chapters earlier to Pharisees and teachers of the law. At that time Jesus said ***"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous 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."*** (Matthew 12:39-40)

This is a plain reference to Jesus' resurrection from the dead after three days in the grave. We know that when that happened, they still refused to believe. Instead, they bribed the guards to lie about Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus calling them an adulterous generation can, of course, refer to their breaking the sixth commandment, either openly or secretly, since Jesus knows all things, but it can also refer to the fact that they broke all of God's covenants and laws. The Old Testament is full of this kind of reference, calling those who reject the true God and follow false gods adulterous people.

To make application to our lives, we must realize that the dangers for us include the hypocrisy of not recognizing the signs which God has ordained and given to us. We, too, often want to seek for signs of our own choosing. Yet the Bible, the very inspired Word of God, tells us all we need to know for our eternal salvation as well as direction for our lives on earth. The Bible tells us the will of God in the Law, the commandments; and it also tells us of the fact that God wants everyone to believe in him and be saved. In addition, the Bible tells us exactly how to be saved, which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Even now the present generation in the world is wise in the matters of this world, but cannot recognize the signs of the times which God has given. The fact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Savior is the only thing that will set their hearts and minds free from sin is hidden from their eyes. In our sermon text the Lord realized the hopelessness of further argument in the case of these deceitful enemies.

After his last words we read that ***"Jesus then left them and went away."*** Jesus wasted no more time with those Pharisees and Sadducees. He had more important things to do, and more fruitful ways to spend his time, so he left. He pronounced judgment upon them by turning his back to them and abruptly departing, a very effective and, often, the only advisable way to deal with enemies of this type.

Peter tells us: ***"in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."*** (1 Peter 3:15) Paul writes to Timothy: ***"Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction."*** (2 Timothy 4:2)

To tell others, you must know the Word of God. And you do. A study of Martin Luther's Large Catechism, which was written for the clergy of his day may remind you of how much of God's Word you already know. But we are to continue to ***"Search the scriptures"*** (John 5:39) so that we may be capable witnesses for Christ. Because you have learned the truths of Scripture, we think of Jesus' words to his apostles: ***"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."*** (Luke 12:11-12)

Jesus is not done with the bad examples of the Pharisees and Sadducees. In the words following our sermon text he warns against the “yeast”, the leaven, of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, as we shall review in our next sermon.

May we learn from this Scripture not to tempt and test God. And when we are confronted by those who ask us what we believe, Lord, give us what to say so that we may truly be your ambassadors. Amen.