

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, August 2, 2009.*

Year B Proper 13

Most of us, at some point or another, have asked God for a sign. Perhaps it was in a moment of crisis. Maybe it was a time of confusion. “God, show me a sign. Show me the right way.” There is a story that many of you have probably heard before about the man who is trapped by a flood. As he climbs to the second story of his house, he prays, “God, please save me. I believe that you will save me.” It’s not long before a person in a rowboat stops by and offers to take the man to safety. “No thanks,” he says. “God is going to save me.” The floodwaters continue to rise and the man climbs on to his roof. He prays again, “God, a person of lesser faith would have gotten into that rowboat, but I know that you are going to save me.” A Coast Guard vessel passes by. Again the man refuses to be helped. “God is going to save me,” he says. The floodwaters keep rising and the man has to climb up on top of his chimney. A helicopter flies by and tries to help the man, but he waves it away yelling, “It’s okay, God is going to save me!” Finally the waters sweep the man away, and he perishes in the flood. His spirit goes to heaven. He asks one of the angels if he can have a quick word with the Lord. “God, I sure am thankful to be here in heaven,” he says, “but I have to ask you why you didn’t save me from the flood.” The Lord replies, “My child, I tried. I sent a rowboat, the coast guard, and a helicopter!” Sometimes we ask for a sign, and we fail to see that the sign is already right in front of us. God is trying to work in the midst of our crises and confusion.

In today’s Gospel lesson, the crowds ask Jesus for a sign. The day before, he has fed five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and some fish. The next day, the hungry crowds are looking for more. “What sign are you performing that we may believe you?” they ask. “Is it like Moses who brought the manna, the bread from heaven?” They do not see that the sign is standing right in front of them. Jesus finally says, “I am the bread of life.” In other words, “I am the sign. I am the indication that God is at work here, that God loves you and sends you the gift of life.”

When have we asked for a sign, and it was staring us in the face all along? Many of us have been wrestling over the latest round in our church’s controversies over human sexuality. As you may have heard, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church passed some resolutions last month in California that have again drawn the criticism of our Anglican brothers and sisters around the world. Some people may be asking God for a sign. “God show us the way in the midst of all this controversy.” Show us if the Episcopal Church was right to affirm the ordination of gays and lesbians as bishops, priests, or deacons. Those who disagree with that decision to ordain gays and lesbians might ask God for a sign of whether they should stay with the church. Those who agree with and celebrate the decision might ask God for a sign of how far to push the issue. How much should we risk isolating ourselves from Anglicans around the world? It seems like a mess that faithful, reasonable, good Anglicans feel so strongly that God is pulling them in one direction, and other faithful, reasonable, and good Anglicans feel equally convinced that God is pulling them in the opposite direction. God show us a sign so our church doesn’t split apart. I wonder, though, if we have already received our sign. Perhaps what we call

a “mess” is in fact, a sign that God is at work. Perhaps the fact that good people of faith disagree over issues of Biblical interpretation and human sexuality is a sign that God is messing with us, that God is stirring the church in a new way. We would like to think that when God acts, it produces only feelings of harmony and joy. It is tempting to assume when controversy and conflict visit the church that something is wrong, that sin has reared its ugly head. But a conflict that is so deep, so based in heart-felt faith, perhaps such a conflict is a sign not of sin, but of grace. Perhaps God's grace is messing with us, stirring us to a new understanding of righteousness, beyond right and left, conservative and liberal.

If our current conflicts are indeed a sign, I wish I could tell you exactly what it means and what we should do. In today's Gospel, the people want a sign from Jesus. They want to understand how they are to believe. Jesus responds by telling them that he is the sign: “I am the bread of life.” When we are confused by the signs of our times, we can give them to Christ, who is the greatest sign of all time. Remember that Christ also said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” “I am the good shepherd who leads the lost sheep. It is through Christ that we will come to understand what God is up to. Our reading from Ephesians reminds us that we have the gift of growing into the full stature of Christ. Growing gradually, though, not all at once. Christ will show us the way. Christ will feed us, but we have to be patient as we grow slowly in our understanding.

Christ feeding us is the sign that God loves us and cares for us and desires to be in relationship with us. And Jesus gave us the sign of bread so that we might always have a way to reconnect with him. That is why we come together each week, to reconnect with Christ and one another through the Holy Eucharist. If we are confused about how God is working, we always have this communion table and the signs of bread and wine as a place to begin and end. We can confess our hunger and come to be fed. We can admit our ignorance and come to taste the goodness of God. That is why it pains me so when Christians in conflict refuse to share this communion meal together. This meal, this great thanksgiving, is a place where we can come to receive food that will strengthen and inspire us for the difficult conversations we must have. If God is in the midst of our mess, then God has also given us bread from heaven, the person of Christ, to help us through it.

The bread of life is not simply communion bread. The bread of life is all of us when we gather in this place for this purpose. The bread of life is the body of Christ that comes together to praise, to pray, to give thanks, and to ask forgiveness. Christ is the bread of life. We, when we are joined in Christian fellowship, are also bread, bread for the world. Like the man in the flood, we may be asking God to save us from trouble. But it may be that God is giving us as a saving sign to the world. God may be working in the midst of our trouble to show a witness of how faithful people can disagree and stay in communion, how faithful people can differ and still speak the truth in love. We can witness as we sing together the words of the hymn: “All who hunger, gather gladly Holy manna is our bread. Come from wilderness and wandering. Here in truth we will be fed. You that yearn for days of fullness, all around us is our food. Taste and see the grace eternal. Taste and see that God is good.”