

I

About a month after I arrived in Athens, on a late Friday afternoon, I was driving home from the church, headed west down Hancock Avenue, when suddenly, an Athens-Clarke County patrol car appeared in my rearview mirror, lights flashing. I pulled over, genuinely curious about the reason for the stop.

The officer approached, introduced himself, and then said, “Did you see that stop sign back there?”

To which I replied, “Um, maybe?”

A few minutes later, he returned with my driver’s license and an invitation to a date at the Clarke County Courthouse. He was very kind and explained that he had responded to three accidents at that intersection in the past three months. I asked him if I had rolled the stop sign or completely blown through the intersection. He responded, “You never touched the brakes.”

To this day, I’m so very glad that I didn’t hurt anyone, that the consequences for my failure to see and respond to the sign was just a dent to the wallet. And to this day, whenever I approach that intersection, I always come to a full stop and look both ways multiple times.

II

Signs, of course, are everywhere in our lives. Even at this very minute, whether you’re present in this room or

joining us online, there are signs within our immediate field of view. But whatever those signs may be, the truth about signs is that they’re only effective to the extent that we collectively assign them a meaning, and when we see them, we respond to them in some generally agreed-upon way. With every sign, it’s not necessarily the sign itself that makes it effective, but rather what the sign points us toward, and the way in which we respond to it. That afternoon on Hancock, even if I’d run into the stop sign there on Hancock that afternoon, at 20 miles an hour, the impact with the stop sign would have slowed me down, but it probably wouldn’t have stopped my car.

And that brings us to our story in John’s gospel today.

III

This winter, we’ve been reading and preaching our way through the gospel of John. And for John, signs, and the people’s response to them or lack thereof - are a big deal.

When we come to our story for today, Jesus has returned to the region of Galilee after making quite a scene in the Temple in Jerusalem, flipping over the tables of the money changers, and as our youth shared with us last week, causing quite a scandal in Samaria by engaging in an extended conversation with the woman at the well. Now Jesus has returned to his “home turf” of Galilee. Already word had spread about how he turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana, and now his exploits

in Jerusalem and Samaria have everyone talking.

Before we get to the story, there's one more piece of background that we need to remember. Several decades before Jesus was born, the Roman Empire came to rule over the entire region. By this point in history, Rome's empire stretched across portions of Europe, Africa, and Asia, and so while the Empire appointed Roman governors to rule over various regions, for managing the day-to-day affairs of their empire, they propped up a series of local rulers as client kings.

So long as the peace was maintained and the tax money rolled in, Rome was happy to provide these client kings with military muscle. Consequently, the client kings and their administrations in almost every part of the Roman empire were notoriously corrupt and viewed by their subjects as sellouts and traitors to their own people.

So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from John 4:43-54.

43 When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee 44 (for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in the prophet's own country). 45 When he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival; for they too had gone to the festival.

46 Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water

into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum. 47 When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. 48 Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." 49 The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my little boy dies." 50 Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. 51 As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. 52 So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, "Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him." 53 The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he himself believed, along with his whole household. 54 Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

All of us can relate to this father's sense of desperation – this royal official who, due to his son's critical illness, has come to beg and plead at the feet of this Galilean rabbi.

As some of you may know, Amy and I are veteran parents of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, as all three of our sons spent time in the intensive care unit as infants, and two of them had a fairly close brush with death.

In those moments, when our babies were so very sick, there's nothing I wouldn't have done, no distance I wouldn't have traveled, and nothing I wouldn't have given that they might be made well.

And so at first glance, Jesus' response seems cold, even downright harsh. He says, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." At first glance, it seems like Jesus is chastising and perhaps even dismissing to this desperate father. Who cares if he was a royal official or what his politics were? When kids are sick, none of that should matter.

But this is one of those places where translating from John's Greek into our English misses something. Because Jesus' response was not directed specifically to the royal official. The "you" in his sentence is plural - it's y'all. He's speaking to everyone standing around - the crowd and his disciples, as well as the royal official. He says, in the Southern, "Unless y'all see signs and wonders, y'all will not believe."

In John's gospel, the word believe is always an action verb. In John's gospel, to believe is not to give passive mental assent to an abstract theological concept. It's to take action with one's whole being, to be transformed from head to toe by the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ.

So, in Ryan's Revised Paraphrase, Jesus is saying, both to the royal official and the crowds there in Cana, "Unless

you see and correctly interpret the signs and wonders that I am doing among you, you will never find life-changing transformation in my name. If you think I'm here just for the show, you've totally missed the point."

The signs that take place there in Cana – the turning of the water into wine, the healing of the royal official's son – those are about what Jesus *does*. But what they point us to, what John is trying to show is, is who Jesus *is*.

The signs tell us that Jesus is more than just a healer. He is more than just a teacher. He is more than a political figure.

These signs that Jesus does point us to a larger truth – that Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is the long-promised, long-awaited Messiah, the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny come together. Jesus is the One who has the power to bring sweet, delicious rich wine, to bring joy and goodness, where before there had only been dryness, embarrassment, and shame.

Jesus is the One who sits down with the Samaritan woman at the well and intentionally crosses all of the sharp red lines we draw between each other – the lines we draw around the boundaries geography and race and gender and class.

Jesus is the One who brings healing to the ones who would come to him, even if they've sinned against God

and neighbor, even if they're despised and reviled and hated. Jesus is the One who has power even over death itself.

The royal official and his whole household were transformed from head to toe by the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ because they saw the sign that Jesus did and correctly interpreted it and responded to it. They believed.

IV

But what about you? What do you believe about Jesus? There's no shortage of opinions out there in the marketplace of ideas.

Some say the entire narrative about Jesus was a made up allegory – that Jesus is no more real than King Arthur.

Some say that there really was a man named Jesus who lived in the ancient near east, but that's as far as it goes.

Some say that Jesus was a great teacher and moral philosopher.

Some go far as to say that Jesus was a great prophet.

But what about you? What signs of Jesus have you seen in your own life? And what have those signs led you to believe? Is Jesus just a made up story? Is Jesus just an interesting historical figure? Is Jesus a great teacher and moral philosopher? Or is Jesus who the gospels say he is – the Word made flesh, the light of the world, the One who turns water into wine, tears into laughter, and death into life, the One who has claimed

you and marked you and called you his very own?

V

This morning, we come once again to this Table, where we break bread and we pour the cup. Over the years, Christians have had differing understandings of what exactly is taking place at this Table, but in our Presbyterian way of being the church, we do not believe that this is the actual body and actual blood of Jesus.

We believe that this is a Sacrament, that is, it's a visible sign that points beyond itself to God's invisible yet ever-present grace. We believe that when we observe this sacrament and come to this Table with our hearts and hands open, when we take the action of believing in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup, we are lifted up by the power of the Holy Spirit in the presence of the risen Lord and with the communion of all the saints.

For us, it's not the wafer or the cup that hold the grace, anymore than it's the stop sign that actually does the stopping. It's the way in which we see the sign and act that makes it effective.

And so, too, with our witness as disciples of Jesus beyond these walls. It's not the story itself that has the power to usher in the kingdom of God here on earth. It's not the story itself that has the power to cross and break down all the sharp lines we draw around geography and race and gender and class. It's not the story itself that has the

power to turn shame and embarrassment and emptiness into abundance and joy and wholeness. It's not the story itself that has the power to speak words of life into the face of death.

The power isn't in the sign itself. It's in the way in which we, as the church, as the living body of Christ, see and respond and act on the story. The power of our discipleship isn't found in our words, in our confessions, in our mission statement, important as though they are. The power of our discipleship is in our *actions*, in the ways in which *we respond* to what we have seen and heard and *come to believe* about Jesus, who is the Light of the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.