

THE SCANDAL OF BELIEF

John 2:12-22; Matthew 12:39-43

John 2:12-22 ¹² After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days. ¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” ²⁰ They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Matthew 12:39-43

³⁹ He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ 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. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here. ⁴³ “When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it.

MESSAGE:

The Old Testament law provided that every Jew was required to go up to Jerusalem once a year to celebrate the Passover. They were also required to offer up certain items for sacrifice. At the first Passover, when they were still slaves in Egypt, God had commanded them to offer up a “lamb without blemish,” whose blood was to be smeared on the doorframes of their houses to ward off the angel of death when he came to take all the firstborn of Egypt. From that time on, God had commanded the Jews to commemorate His deliverance by continuing to offer up sacrifices for the atonement of their sins. Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the world, and since it was inconvenient for those who traveled a great distance to bring live animals along with them, there were merchants in Jerusalem who would sell them animals for the sacrifices. There were also

moneychangers who for a fee would exchange Jewish coinage for that of other denominations. Nowadays we call this “arbitrage.” The merchants and moneychangers had originally set up their businesses around the foot of the temple mount, but as they competed for better and better “storefront exposure,” over time they had moved up the long stairways to the giant courtyard where the temple itself stood. In their minds they were doing nothing wrong—they were just trying to make an honest living by selling religious supplies. It apparently didn’t bother them that the temple mount had come to resemble Friday-night bingo at Our Lady of Perpetual Ambiguity, but hey! It was all the Lord’s work, wasn’t it?

Then one day, this religious zealot came along. He went on a rampage—turning over their tables, scattering their merchandise and driving them out of the temple courtyard. He seemed to be acting with some kind of authority, but they had no idea who he was or where he might have gotten such authority. So they demanded that he show them a sign of some kind to prove that he had the authority to do what he had done. They reacted in the same way I suspect we would react if somebody were to walk in here right now and said “*Stop what you’re doing! This worship service is over!*” We’d say, “*Sez who?*” In other words, “*Show us some proof that you have the authority to shut us down!*”

In the case of the Jewish merchants and moneychangers, since Jesus was attempting to regulate matters that involved the temple, the only kind of authority they would accept was divine authority. Therefore they asked him for a miraculous “sign”—to prove that he possessed divine authority. Something like the signs God had enabled Moses to perform to prove that he had been sent by God. “*Turn your staff into a snake! Rain some frogs down!*”

So Jesus gave them a sign. He said, “*Destroy this temple and I will raise it up again in three days.*” Well, they were dumbfounded. They couldn’t believe their ears! Herod’s temple had been under construction for forty-six years and it still wasn’t completely finished. Even his disciples were astonished. Who in their right mind would claim that they could do something like that?

Here we have a good example of something that happens over and over again in the Gospels. Jesus speaks on one level and people understand him on a completely different level. It’s kind of like the little girl who had nightmares after she heard her father singing in the shower: “*I left my heart in San Francisco.*” They assumed he was speaking of Herod’s temple, but the temple he was referring to was the temple of his body. They wanted him to do a “rabbit out of the hat” trick, but Jesus wasn’t going to waste his time on cheap magic. Instead, he offered them a sign that went far beyond anything they could have imagined: the resurrection of his own dead body to life. But they didn’t understand then and they didn’t understand later—even when he fulfilled the sign by rising from the dead. Only his disciples—those who had faith—could understand the sign when it came—and it took them awhile to get it.

The refusal of Jesus to authenticate his divine ministry and prove that he was the Son of God by performing signs and wonders is one of the great scandals of the Christian faith. A scandal is something that offends many people and the fact that Jesus asks us to believe that he is the Son of God NOT on the basis of empirical evidence of his deity but on the basis of faith offends many people. True, his resurrection from the dead was both a miraculous sign and an empirical fact—witnessed and attested to by many reliable observers—but we weren’t there, so we remain skeptical. For that matter, the majority of

those who *were* there remained skeptical. As Abraham said to the rich man in hell who requested that he be allowed to appear to his brothers and warn them of what lay after death—*“Let them read Moses and the prophets. If they do not listen to them, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”* [Luke 16:29] Well, someone did rise from the dead and they remained unconvinced.

Jesus asks us to believe without the benefit of proof which would satisfy our powers of observation and reason, and while that may make sense spiritually, it is an intellectual scandal. Over the past few centuries, science and technology have convinced us that our highest faculties are our powers of observation and reason, so we have come to trust those faculties above all others as the most reliable way of discovering the truth. “Seeing is believing” we say and logic is—well—logical. Yet Jesus asks us to base our knowledge of the most important thing in our lives—our religious belief—on faith, which, according to the Bible, is *“...the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen.”* (Hebrews 11:1) It’s a scandal!

It’s more than an intellectual scandal, it’s an existential scandal as well. Jesus not only asks us to believe in his divinity in the sense of giving our intellectual assent—he asks us to entrust our lives to him—our hearts, our souls, our minds and our strength. He urges us to have the faith of Abraham who staked the life of his son Isaac upon God’s mercy. Belief by itself is not enough: we need to trust Jesus to do what He has promised. ***Faith is trust.*** Back in the 1920’s, a tightrope walker had a wire strung over Niagara Falls from the American side to the Canadian side and announced that he would walk over the Falls on the wire. The event was publicized and when the time came a large crowd gathered to witness his attempt. The winds were strong; the wire swayed back and forth, and there was fear and excitement in the air. After much fanfare, the wire walker passed over the falls and back on the wire. Then he did something that surprised everyone: he placed a wheelbarrow on the wire and pushed it over the falls and back. Then he asked that everyone in the crowd who believed that he could put someone in the wheelbarrow and safely take him over the falls and back raise his hand. Virtually every hand was raised. Then he asked for a volunteer. Guess how many hands went up? They believed him; they just didn’t trust him. Jesus asks us to trust him with everything—our hopes, our dreams, our possessions and our lives. He urges us to have a faith which enables us to stake our lives a thousand times over on Him without hesitation. A faith like the one Jesus challenges the young man to have when he urged him to, *“Go and sell everything you possess and give to the poor. Then take up your cross and follow me.”* [Mark 10:21 & Matthew 19:21]

That is the kind of faith to which you and I are called. It’s a faith that God has promised to work in us if we will allow him to. As James wrote, even the demons believe that there is a God—and shudder. They believe that he exists and that he is all powerful: but they are not able to believe that he died for their sins and rose to give them eternal life. Their knowledge is factual but it won’t save them. The only faith that frees us from slavery to the world, the flesh and the devil is an existential faith—a faith of absolute trust. And that’s a scandal!

And because it is a scandal, it could never come from us. Under our own power we could never turn loose of our idolatry of this world, of the cravings of our own flesh or of our tendency to believe the lies of Satan. The world, the flesh and the devil are all too attractive, too reasonable, too “empirical” for us to resist. By our own strength—mental

and physical—we are lost. But thanks be to God, he doesn't abandon us to our own strength.

He not only invites us to a saving and liberating faith—he offers us this faith through the effectual power and work of the Holy Spirit. God creates faith in us, God sustains faith in us, and God will increase the faith we have. He doesn't dangle the hope of eternal life in front of us and then cast us upon our own resources to grasp it and hold on to it. That would not be grace; that

would be a cruel joke. We couldn't hold on to a saving faith by our own strength any longer than we could cling to the edge of a cliff. Sooner or later we would let go and plunge to our destruction.

But God, the Holy Spirit, creates faith in us, regenerates faith in us and nourishes faith in us through word and sacrament, so that our minds can be liberated from the deceitful illusions of this world and illuminated by hope, which is faith applied to the future. Faith assures us of what is; hope assures us of what will be. Through God-given faith and God-given hope, we are freed up to practice God-given love.

And so we can thank God that our belief is a scandal, that it neither depends upon rabbits out of the hat nor rests upon our knowledge of this transient and ephemeral world, because our faith and hope are from God and not from us. We can sing with confidence the words of John Newton's beautiful hymn, "*Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*":

*Fading are the worldling's pleasures
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting pleasures
None but Zion's children know!*

Amen.