

## Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

*The Sky*

## Gospel Lesson

Matthew 16:1-4 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. <sup>2</sup>He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' <sup>3</sup>And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. <sup>4</sup>An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." Then he left them and went away.

## Psalm

Psalm 85 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
<sup>2</sup>You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin. *Selah*  
<sup>3</sup>You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.  
<sup>4</sup>Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us.  
<sup>5</sup>Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?  
<sup>6</sup>Will you not revive us again,  
so that your people may rejoice in you?  
<sup>7</sup>Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.  
<sup>8</sup>Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.  
<sup>9</sup>Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.  
<sup>10</sup>Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
<sup>11</sup>Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
<sup>12</sup>The LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
<sup>13</sup>Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.

## Bible/Sermon Focus

With as much as the Pharisees and Sadducees historically did not get along, we'd be quick to think they were close friends and companions in their faith journey and leadership given their shared detest of Jesus. In this so-called prophet from Nazareth, they found themselves a common fear and a common enemy. Like the old adage, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

In our Gospel lesson this week, both of these sets of Jewish religious leaders came to test Jesus. They asked Jesus for a sign from the sky (or from the heavens). Jesus, always quick on his toes, talks about how we read the sky to observe weather patterns. He insists that signs have been all around them. They just haven't seen them.

And it's true. Jesus had been traveling the countryside restoring people back into relationship with the community and with God. He had been healing people, sometimes in the body, sometimes in their relationship to their neighbors. Jesus had been engaging with all kinds of people, not just his fellow Jewish folk. Jesus had been teaching and living out the instructions of the Law (Torah) for what they were...a law based in love, not in specific rules.

Which ties very well into Jesus' last statement, "but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah."

In the story of Jonah, God calls Jonah to go prophesy to a foreign nation, Nineveh. But the scriptures of the Law (Torah) of God have very clear rules and laws about how foreigners are not equal to God, and will never be allowed to become part of the community.

God calls Jonah to prophesy there in Nineveh, and to tell the people to repent. And eventually he does. Then, something miraculous happens. A miracle takes place. The people do repent! The Law of God is about love, not rule following. And Jesus points it out to these Pharisees and Sadducees. They demanded a sign but they've been given one and will keep getting the same one. God has come for ALL of the people, not just some. The Law is about love and not rules.

And as Jonah sat in the belly of a fish for three days, so will Jesus sit in a tomb for three days before his resurrection takes place. And as the Jesus movement grows, the foreigners, the gentiles will be reached by the love and message of Jesus and of God.

Neither the Pharisees and Sadducees followed the Torah or believed exactly the same things as their fellow Jewish leaders of just a few generations before them. No religion stays stagnant. They themselves disagreed with each other. When they come to test Jesus, they are not actually looking for a sign of what *God is doing*. They are looking for a sign to confirm what *they are doing*. They don't want a sign showing them what *God wants* they want a sign to confirm what *they want*. God sends signs all the time. Our response to a sign may be based if they fit our agenda or not.

Learning to open our eyes and our ears, our hearts and our lives to God's will is an important part of being a follower of Jesus. Genuinely asking God what God is trying to teach us, naming the issues on our hearts and then asking God for a sign and for guidance can be a regular part

of our prayer life. But then, we have to be open to receive what God says in response. Often that may take a few days, maybe even longer. We have to listen and look and stay open. Because if we are just looking for a confirmation of what we want, we may miss the even better thing that God has planned.

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever received a "sign" from God? What was it?
2. Why do you think the Pharisees and Sadducees struggled so much with Jesus?
3. How are you like the Pharisees and Sadducees?
4. What role does the natural world play into how you hear and see God speaking to you?
5. Jonah was resistant to follow his calling and all of the signs God placed in front of him. When have you been like Jonah?
6. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, and like Jonah, when have you struggled to love people different than you? Have you felt called by God to connect with contexts outside of your own?

## Prayer

God of large fish and foreign lands, different people and those who we know so well, we ask that you open our eyes and ears to your signs. That our hearts be open to receiving what you are doing in this world. Soften our defenses. Humble us. Teach us to be the people you have called us to be. And when we ask for a sign, help us to approach your creation looking for your purpose, not for confirmation of purpose that originates only in ourselves. Amen.

*"God is already at work. God is present and at work among us, it's how we open our eyes to see it around us that matters."*