

Signs and Wonders

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 17:5-10 October 2, 2016 Pentecost 20; World
Communion Sunday

There are signs all around us. Of course, there are church signs, such as this one. One day, as Sandy and I drove down one street, we were noting the lawn signs—houses for sale, vote for this candidate or that, and one yard had a green sign with white letters—JESUS. “I wonder what office he’s running for?” I asked my wife. “Whatever it is, we’d better vote for him.” Then there are those big, flashing, bright electronic billboards. One warned me the other day not to drive distracted. The sign was the only thing distracting me! Then there are bumper stickers. Several years back, I chuckled at the back bumper where a sticker behind the driver said, “On my way to heaven.” The sticker behind the passenger seat said, “Don’t follow me, I’m lost, too.” Do you suppose that represents the marriage of a Christian and an agnostic?

Signs, bumper stickers, ads, all cry out for our attention. It reminds me of the prophet Habbakuk. Habakkuk lived in an in-between time, a time when a whole nation was waiting for the other shoe to drop; when a whole nation could only see destruction, darkness, and evil in its future. In chapter 1, the prophet described this evil, both what was and what was to come. Then in chapter 2, he basically challenged God. “I’m going to stand here on the city wall until I get an answer for my questions.” Then God answers: “Here’s your answer. Write it in large letters, so someone running by can see it.” Today we’d say, “put it on a billboard.” And God’s answer was yes, the evil days would come. But the righteous would live by faith. If they truly believed in God, if they truly stayed faithful to God, they would continue to be God’s people no matter how bad things became. Eugene Peterson translates it this way.

But the person in right standing before God

through loyal and steady believing
is fully alive, *really* alive.

That was the message on Habakkuk's sign: Even when times get tough, God will remain faithful, so we should remain faithful to God.

A few weeks ago, we talked about the definition of faith in Hebrews, that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Habakkuk teaches us that faith is faithfulness, a loyal and steady rooting of our lives in God. And that takes us to Luke, to our gospel lesson. If you listened to last week's lesson about the uncaring rich man going to Hades, you might have thought that Jesus was having a bad day, that he was a bit grumpy. But in this section of Luke, his words often sting and surprise. Earlier in the 17th chapter, he warned of what would happen to those who caused others to stray from God; he said that sometimes it would be necessary to rebuke offenders when they do wrong, and that it was also necessary to forgive them when they ask forgiveness. Difficult tasks, right? The disciples didn't feel prepared. They weren't sure that they were up for the occasion. They didn't have the powerful faith that gave them the strength to do the kinds of things that Jesus did. So they asked him, "Increase our faith!"

Jesus challenged them "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." Now that saying is a vivid signpost all its own, like the signs on the highway or the sign that God told Habakkuk to make. It's vivid. It's wild. It sticks in your mind like glue. Is Jesus telling the disciples that they don't have faith? No, the way the grammar works in the original Greek, Jesus is saying that that they do have faith; they just haven't developed it enough yet. It's more like he's saying this: "If you have faith...and you do, at least you're starting to—you can do spectacular things. Want an example? See that tree? You could yank it in the air, levitate it, make it fly for a

splashdown in the sea.” In other words, you can do things that you thought it was impossible for you to do.” He’s not discouraging them, he’s encouraging them. It’s like a coach convincing a couch potato that there are really muscles in there somewhere, and if the couch potato starts using them, he or she will become fit.

But then Jesus switches gears. They’re all pumped up, but now Jesus deflates them. When you do good things, when you do great things, don’t expect a lot of praise, don’t expect a lot of thanks. After all, you’re only doing what God expects you to. Why? He’s reminding them that if they do spectacular wonderful things in God’s name, it’s really God that does them. They can’t take any credit.

They can’t say, “Hey, wow, look at me,” rather they need to say, “Hey, wow, look at God. They need to be signs pointing to God. God needs to shine through. They—we—aren’t the center of the universe, God is.

So what about the mulberry tree? That would be a pretty good trick, a sign and wonder, if our faith were strong enough.

But let me ask you. What’s more difficult? To uproot a mulberry tree, or for a band of eleven hunted fugitives, hiding behind locked doors, going out to challenge a nation and an empire with the good news of Christ’s resurrection?

What’s more difficult? To send that tree flying through the air, or to stand up as a martyr in an arena filled with lions, boldly proclaiming that Christ is Lord?

What’s more difficult? To make that tree splash into the ocean, or to enter hostile and suspicious territory to tell of the love of Christ, to convert whole nations to God?

What’s more difficult? Moving a tree, or even a mountain, or building and maintaining a church such as this, having a faithful and effective witness in the community and reaching out in mission to the world, for over a hundred years and still to be excited about the future?

What's more difficult? Getting up on Sunday morning or rising from the dead? What's more difficult? Spending your money on whatever the spin merchants try to sell you, or investing your money in faith into the work of God right here, in this place? What's more important? Putting signs in our yards or stickers on our bumpers, or being signs, even being wonders, letting the grace and love of God show through us and our lives? I can't tell you what's the most difficult, that's up to you, but I can tell you what's more important—that we live faithfully in covenant with God, and trust, trust, trust, believe, believe, believe, live, live, live, that faith we have received.

If you still want a sign greater than an uprooted mulberry tree, I point to the table before you, which is be filled with the elements of communion. I found a poem this week which helps give new meaning to what we are doing. It is by Andrew King, and called

THE TABLE WITH NO EDGES

We will sit down where feet tire from the journey.
We will sit down where grief bends the back.

We will sit down under roofs wrecked by artillery.
We will sit down where cries sound from cracked walls.

We will sit down where heat beats like hammers.
We will sit down where flesh shivers in cold.

We will sit down where bread bakes on thin charcoal.
We will sit down where there is no grain in baked fields.

We will sit down with those who dwell in ashes.
We will sit down in shadow and in light.

We will sit down, making friends out of strangers.
We will sit down, our cup filled with new wine.

We will sit down and let love flow like language.
We will sit down where speech needs no words.

We will sit together at the table with no edges.
We will sit to share one loaf, in Christ's name, in one world.¹
(unquote)

On this World Communion Sunday, Christians of a vast variety of different creeds, languages, cultures, all around the world will come to the table together. Race, gender, custom, politics, age, sexuality, economic status, do not matter here. This table is a sign. This table is a wonder. As we eat the bread and drink the wine, Jesus Christ will be here with us; and with Christians across the sea. In every part of the world where Christians, of whatever denomination gather, we will be one family. We will taste and see that God is good. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

¹ © Copyright 2015 by Andrew King. earth2earth.wordpress.com/2015/09/27/poem-for-world-wide-communion-2015/