

# Sermon Text for November 3, 2024

*Matthew 16:1-4*

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Good morning! My heart is bursting. While it is not my place to tell you all the details, I wanted to share my joy with you. I've had the privilege of walking alongside someone as they are experiencing the Spirit of God for the first time. Their discovery and curiosity are leading the way, and I'm so honored to be trusted with a vulnerable process and emerging hope.

Interestingly, this person seems to be writing a story of moving from certainty to faith. We often think it will be the opposite: that coming to Christ is a move from doubt to certainty. But, we live in an age of declarations and battlegrounds, where people stake their claims. It is not always safe to wonder, to explore, to need the time to discover who God is.

Today's story is a story where certainty and uncertainty mix. It is a story of some people who seem to want clarity, but in fact, they are quite certain, and that certainty causes them to miss the indicators. They miss the sign of resurrection and renewed life.

Prayer for hearing the Word and sermon.

## **Read Matthew 16:1-4**

The Pharisees and Sadducees come together across the aisle and come to Jesus. Now, this is the second time the Pharisees have come to Jesus asking him for a sign. They set aside their differences and ask Jesus

for something of a miracle,  
Something concrete, pointing to the supernatural.

This clip from the older movie Bruce Almighty has always reminded me of how much we humans want God to send us a message to give us direction or confirm something where we are uncertain.

Bruce Almighty clip- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQKi3mlcQN4>

Jesus responds to them: No sign will be given except the sign of Jonah. Jonah was the reluctant Hebrew missionary sent to their pagan and evil neighbors in Ninevah. He was more than reluctant. He was like a sullen teenager refusing to take God's instructions. Instead of going, he spent 3 days in the whale. And, despite that, the whole city repented and began to follow God. And then their acceptance of God upset Jonah.

Going back to the Pharisees, the first time they ask for a sign, Jesus specifically points to Jonah's three days in the whale. He compares it to the three days he spends in the earth before He is raised from the dead. If they struggle to learn from Jonah's story, how will they cope with the tension of an empty tomb? Jesus invites them to consider, rather than give them another miracle.

Jonah- and the Pharisees and Sadducees- and some of Matthew's readers, including us- miss the point of what God is doing. First God did it with Jonah as a missionary, and then he sent his Son to gather together peoples from all the ethnicities and nations. God is not for one people group, one nation, one party or tribe. All people need the righteousness and justice given through the cross. Jesus is gathering to himself the Pharisees, Sadducees and the gentiles. Jesus has given his body for you and has shed his blood- the blood of the new covenant- for you and me. For all of us.

Read v.4 again.

Some think Jesus sounds a little irritated in our passage. Others might say, Yes, Jesus is blunt, but, he nevertheless continues to talk to them. Notice with me, that his response to the Pharisees is like his response to the Canaanite woman in the previous passage.

[\*We break the bible into neat separate sections, but they are really related to each other!]

The Canaanite woman had a daughter with an evil spirit. When Jesus told her bread is for children of Israel not her. Jesus told the Pharisees, no sign will be given. The woman answered with faith saying, your crumbs will be enough. In contrast, the Pharisees do not answer Jesus in faith. They are silent and say nothing.

Jesus reminds them of the "crumb" he offers them: the sign of Jonah. He tries to intrigue, provoke, entice them with his odd saying. He wants to get their attention so they do not miss the thunderous sign reverberating through of all history: Jesus' death and resurrection.

The reverberations of the cross and empty tomb reach back into the past and forward into the future.

### **What can we see God doing and how do we interpret it?**

I worked with colleges students all over Lancaster County, South Central PA and up and the east coast for more than 20 years. One of my last assignments was at Alvernia College. I was given the name and contact information of a single student. I promised I would meet her and see if God wanted to do anything more. She invited me back the next week and over the next three years, a group grew to dozens students.

It was beautiful! But, I got too old! There was a moment in a conversation when I realized, they are talking to me in that guarded way you talk to your mother. Oh no. It was time for me to move on to something else.

One place we may be susceptible to misinterpreting signs of the times in the political realm. I

It has, in the past and again today, that there is a political idea bubbling up that one or another candidate for public office is chosen by God. The story goes, there is some sign to assure us and give us confidence to know this. Today, some Christians have been thinking that the sign is in the contradictions: that because a person's character is so reprehensible, but he initiated some policies Christians support, he must be God's chosen candidate. Why else would someone seem to act against their character?

I think that misses the nature of politics. It also does not follow from what we have learned about signs in Matthew 16. In the political realm, candidates must make promises in exchange for loyalty and votes.

Our second passage this morning from 2 Samuel 16, focuses our attention on politics, in a sense. There are no instances of democracy in the Bible. Democracy affords us freedoms, protections, and responsibilities. That said, through the life of King David, we see the challenges and failures that come when we select our own leaders. The people cried out for a king and God provided. They asked for a human, earthly king who would represent God and they got Saul.

Of course, God chose David to replace Saul, but he also utterly failed (Bathsheba and Uriah) More terrible things happened as David grew older. Things we don't talk about in church because it'd be rated R if it were a movie. The beautiful legacy of David was actually something of God. The Lord promised that One from David's line would sit on his throne forever, Jesus. Jesus completely redefined kingship into an almost unrecognizable form when he died and was resurrected. We- the church- we already have God's chosen leader. Not of our country of course, but nonetheless, our leader.

For the last 100 years, Africa has been a place of incredible Christian renewal and new life. The church has grown from 7 million Christians to more than 700 million Christians.

I met Jaki in one of my first Fuller Theological Seminary classes in one of the most diverse small groups you could imagine. We represented 4 continents and only a couple of us were the same ethnicity. Jaki, like me, is a mom. But, she has accomplished so much working in her community. After her son was diagnosed with autism, she began to help her people understand and navigate disabilities in God's Kingdom. She worked for:

Access to things people take for granted

Understanding from neighbors

Networking parents who's children need justice

Preparing families for when Parents pass away

How disability fits into God's plan.

"We have miracles, signs and wonders happening all the time, if we just look and see. People with disabilities display the glory of God; including them in the church helps us see what God is doing. He is glorifying himself on a daily basis." Jaki Mathaga, Mavuno Church. Jaki lives and ministers in Kenya.

Sometimes I pray, asking this question, God, what are you doing, and might I see it? In addition to sending an email and reading Jaki's story, sometimes, I wait and listen to see what God brings to mind or who comes across my path that day. Sometimes God answers me in pictures. Today, an image came to my mind of a hillside at dusk. It was as if I was standing on a balcony, because I could see across the valley for miles. Dotted all over the hillside were small campfires, as if they were on the patio of many homes. God is at work in many places and in ways we can see. Let's look!

Communion Sunday!