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WHAT SIGN DO YOU SHOW US?

John 2:13-22

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Antrel Rolle was a safety with the New York Giants, but he wanted to play somewhere else. When the Chicago Bears invited him to come and join their team, Antrel wondered whether it was God's will, and so he asked for a sign. He said, "I pray that you just give me a sign to lead me in the right direction, and I'll follow your lead." The next morning when Rolle woke up, he saw an email on his phone. To the untrained observer this email might have been considered spam, but Rolle recognized as a sign from God. The subject line read: "Orbitz alert: Flights to Chicago, discount fare." With that email—and a three year, \$11.25 million contract—Rolle knew that God was sending him to Chicago.

Interpreting the signs isn't always so easy. Is it God? Or mere coincidence? If it is God, then what does the sign mean, and what are you supposed to do about it? It's not wrong to ask God for a sign, but with all the subjectivity that's involved, it may not lead to any greater clarity.

The Gospel according to John, on the other hand, provides us with clear signs regarding the identity and authority of Jesus. In this message, we will take a look at the greatest of Jesus' signs and consider how we ought to respond.

SHOW US A SIGN

After Jesus drove out the vendors and money changers from the temple, the Jewish authorities¹ asked him: "What *sign* do you show us for doing these things?" (John 2:18)

Signs are very important in the Gospel of John. John used the word *σημεῖον* ("sign") frequently through the Gospel (seventeen times). The first use of the word was in the previous episode, at the wedding reception in Cana, when Jesus turned the water into wine. At the end

¹ What John meant by "the Jews" throughout his Gospel is not what we today would typically think of, i.e. not an ethnicity or a religion. John was ethnically and religiously Jewish, as was Jesus. Yet they were distinct from the people in power. So when John speaks of "the Jews," he does not refer to all ethnic Jews, but instead to the Jewish establishment in Roman-occupied Palestine. "The Jews" weren't supremely in power; Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor Caesar had stationed there. Yet "the Jews" were effectively the permission-givers for ethnic Jews living in Palestine.

of that story John said, “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11). Jesus said and did a lot of wonderful things in John’s Gospel, but his turning water into wine was the first miracle explicitly identified as a sign.

John’s last use of the word “sign” is found at the end of the Gospel, where he explained why Jesus’ signs are so important. John wrote, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31).

In John’s Gospel, believing in Jesus is important, but it’s not the ultimate goal. John wants us to believe in Jesus in a way that transforms our lives, so that by believing we have life in him. That’s what Jesus’ signs are pointing us toward in the Gospel of John: Life in Jesus.

In John 2:18, the temple authorities asked Jesus, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” They weren’t hoping to find life in his name. Rather, they were outraged by Jesus’ stirring up trouble in the temple, and they were demanding his credentials—not unlike the police pulling someone over and asking for a driver’s license. When the temple authorities asked, “What sign do you show us?” they weren’t looking for a miraculous sign. They were convinced that Jesus had transgressed *their* authority, and they were asking, in essence, “Who do you think you are?”

It’s a valid question, and one that all of Jesus’ signs are meant to answer. In the previous episode, Jesus’ sign of turning water into wine at a wedding reception vividly demonstrated his creative power and lavish generosity. Within the overarching narrative of the Bible, this sign was also a spectacular way to reveal Jesus’ identity as the long-awaited Messiah, coming as a bridegroom for his bride.

Now, in this next episode depicting Jesus in the temple, who does he think he is? *And what exactly is the sign that he gives?* To answer these questions, we need to examine the story a little more carefully.

1. WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

First, let’s explore what this story has to say about who Jesus thought he was. John begins this way (v 13): “The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” Passover was the annual celebration of God’s deliverance of his people in the Exodus. After the Israelites settled in the Promised Land, it became customary for them to gather and celebrate Passover at the temple. So it wasn’t merely Jesus who went up to Jerusalem; everyone did, and the city was crowded with people.

We learn a lot about who Jesus thought he was by where he went that day. The first place he went in Jerusalem was the temple. The temple, though certainly impressive, would not have been particularly big by modern standards, not nearly as massive or tall as our Capitol building. Its footprint was probably closer to the size of the Lincoln Memorial. Nevertheless, whenever you read “temple” in the Gospels, don’t think merely of the temple building; think of it as a complex of both the building and the grounds, like the Capitol complex in DC. The temple grounds were a spacious thirty-six acres, roughly a ¼ mile on each side. Yet on feast days, those thirty-six acres could feel uncomfortably crowded, just like our National Mall on Independence Day, when suddenly the spacious grounds feel way too small for all the people. That’s what the temple grounds would have been like during the Feast of Passover.

John tells us (v. 14) that Jesus found there those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons. Most families would sacrifice and partake of roast lamb for Passover. The ox and the pigeon represented the high and low end of the scale of acceptable sacrifices for Passover. Larger or wealthier families might sacrifice an ox, while poorer families might only be able to afford a pigeon. Most worshipers who came from Galilee, or Alexandria, or Rome, probably would not have been able to bring along a sacrificial animal. While the temple grounds were supposed to be used for the worshipers who came there, it’s easy to imagine how the need for acceptable sacrificial animals could have filled the temple grounds with vendors. The animals were something people clearly needed if they were going to keep the Passover.

John also tells us (v 14) that Jesus found money changers there. The Roman money that everyone used had an image of god on it, but it was the wrong god. It was a picture of Caesar. The Second Commandment prohibited graven images, so the temple authorities would not permit the animal vendors to trade using Roman money. Instead, they made provision for a currency exchange. Roman coins with images could be exchanged for temple coins without images. Again, it’s easy to imagine how the need for the proper currency adjacent to the temple market could have taken up space that was originally intended for worshipers.

When Jesus saw all of this, he didn’t fly into a rage. His response, as John describes it, was premeditated. From v 15, it sounds like Jesus sat down somewhere, likely with the market in clear view, and he wove cords together into a whip. Then when he was ready, he drove out the merchants and overturned the money changers’ tables. One vigilante against who knows how many vendors and money changers and animals and stuff. Can you imagine what it must have been like that day? The noise and the fear and the chaos of people trying to get away from what must have felt like a madman on the loose? Just who did Jesus think he was? What right did he have to turn the entire national Passover Festival upside-down like this?

Jesus was acting like he owned the place—and that was precisely the point of contention between him and the authorities. Jesus was convinced that he *did* own the place, or at least that he was the rightful heir, because he believed that he was the Son of God. He said, “Take these things away; do not make my *Father’s* house a house of trade” (2:16). To Jesus, the

temple was *his Father's* house, and so he had every right to do some housekeeping there. But the temple authorities strongly disagreed.

So who did Jesus think he was? He thought he was God's Son and the Lord of the Temple.

2. WHAT'S YOUR SIGN?

Secondly, the authorities asked (v 18), "What sign do you show us?" Did Jesus give them a sign, and if so, what was it?

Had we been there when Jesus cracked the whip on all the merchants, what kind of sign would have been sufficient to convince us that he wasn't a madman? Or what if Jesus visited us here on the Mall on Independence Day? What if he began overturning metal detectors and portapotties and claiming ownership over the Capitol? What would it take to convince us to follow him? We would need a thoroughly convincing sign, a sign to end all signs, confirming with certainty that he ought to be in charge. And that's exactly what Jesus is about to show us.

In order to understand this sign, it's important that we know why Jesus was so angry that day. Contemporary interpreters often read their own concerns into Jesus' actions and come to some pretty outlandish conclusions. It's not, for example, about vegetarianism; Jesus wasn't protesting roast lamb at Passover. Nor was he making a big statement against business and banking, opposing the commercialization of Passover by trying to put the "communism back into communion." Jesus, rather, was angry with what the temple had become. No longer was it clearly his Father's house. Instead, the temple itself had become an ambiguous and confusing sign.

The temple authorities had forgotten what the temple was intended to be. Not only were they stewards of its building and grounds, but much more importantly, they were also stewards of its vision, a vision that is the very backbone of the Scriptures. Israel was to become a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, and the temple in Jerusalem was to become a big, bold welcome sign for people from every tribe and tongue. The temple should have been a house of prayer for all nations. The promise of the Old Testament was that some day, when the messiah came, people from every nation would stream to Mt Zion, up to the Father's house, where their sins would be forgiven, and they would be welcomed into God's own family. But whether because the court of the Gentiles had been turned into a marketplace, or because the temple authorities were xenophobes, or because of yet other factors, the temple *wasn't* a sign of welcome. It was, rather, a sign reading "Do Not Enter." That's why Jesus was angry. And that's why he came during the Feast of Passover to set things right.

Jesus' actions prompted the temple authorities to ask (v 18), "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" In response, Jesus said (v 19), "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

What an odd thing to say! Jesus was the one who seemed to be destroying the place, not them. And what in the world could he mean by raise it up again in three days? It had taken them forty-six years to build the temple. There's no way that something so grand could be rebuilt in only three days. Yes, to the temple authorities this was indeed a sign—a sign that Jesus was completely bonkers!

John points out (v 21) that Jesus was shifting the focus of the conversation away from the Jerusalem temple *to the temple of his body*. But why? Why didn't Jesus seize the opportunity to bring prophetic condemnation upon the temple authorities for their sin? If it had been me, I would have tarred and feathered them for their misappropriation of the temple. This was Jesus' big moment to tell them off for their failure to lead. Why didn't he do it?

Look again at John 2:18. The authorities didn't ask Jesus *why* he did what he did. They asked him *what sign* he would show them. Not *why*, but *what sign*. And that's when Jesus shifted the focus of the conversation to his coming resurrection.

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus' turning water into wine at the wedding reception in Cana was the first miracle that John explicitly identified as a "sign." Here are all the miracles in John's Gospel identified explicitly as signs:

1. John 2. At the wedding reception in Cana, Jesus turned water into wine.
2. John 4. Back in Cana, Jesus healed the Capernaum official's dying son from a distance.
3. John 5. In Jerusalem, Jesus made the lame man to walk at the pool of Bethesda.
4. John 6. Beside the Sea of Galilee, Jesus miraculously fed 5,000 (men).
5. John 9. In Jerusalem, Jesus healed the blind man who washed in the Pool of Siloam.
6. John 11. In Bethany, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

Six amazing miracles explicitly identified as "signs." Any one of them convincing of Jesus' power. But still, would any of these be enough to convince you to trust him as king, particularly over the temple? What kind of sign would be sufficient to convince you to trust Jesus with your entire life?

Here's something you ought to know about John, the author of this Gospel. John loves sevens. There are, for example, seven named disciples in the Gospel. Seven Jewish feasts are mentioned. There are the seven "I am" sayings of Jesus. Not to mention all the sevens in John's apocalypse, the Book of Revelation: seven churches, seven letters, seven lampstands, seven stars, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, etc.

Isn't it strange that in this Gospel, John identified only six miracles explicitly as signs? There are only six, unless you want to count the sign that Jesus gave the temple authorities here in John 2:18-19. Remember the question (v 18) wasn't *why* Jesus did what he did, but *what sign* would he show for doing these things. The answer Jesus gave them was the resurrection of his body on the third day. Just for confirmation, John adds in v 22, "When therefore he was raised from

the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scriptures and the word that Jesus had spoken." In other words, they believed because of the seventh and greatest sign: the Lord Jesus, resurrected from the dead on the third day. Jesus' resurrection on Easter is the "missing sign" in John's Gospel.

With this seventh sign, now we're able to make better sense of what Jesus was doing at the temple in Jerusalem that day. He wasn't simply *cleansing* the temple, reforming it so that it could be restored to its original purpose. Rather, he was closing it down, rendering it obsolete. No longer would its mismanagement be an obstacle to those longing to draw near to God. As Jesus would soon say to the Samaritan woman, "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father....The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." (4:21, 23). No longer would people need to buy their Passover lamb. Jesus' body would be broken, and his blood spilled, so that death might pass us by as we feast with him forever. No longer would people look to the Jerusalem temple as an ambiguous sign of God's attitude toward outsiders. A new and better sign would take its place. After that first Easter morning, Jesus' resurrected body would become the clear and unambiguous invitation to all people to believe in him, and by believing in him find life in him.

Five hundred eyewitnesses saw Jesus after his resurrection (1 Cor 15:6). That's no email about discount flights. It represents the ultimate, unambiguous demonstration of Jesus' authority and power. If the healings and other miracles weren't clear enough, here's the last and greatest of the signs: three days after being brutally slaughtered, Jesus returned to life, better than ever. Jesus conquered death! And that is what this passage is all about.

How then shall we respond to this clear sign that Jesus has shown us? In the beginning, when Eden was the original temple, it served as a place where God would come and walk with his people. Now Jesus is the final temple, and he invites us all, once again, to come and walk with him. Come experience him as the living temple, from which love and forgiveness flow in a never-ending stream. Believe in the signs he has shown us, and then, walking with him, find life in his name.

One thing have I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
and to inquire in his temple. (Psalm 27:4)