

“The Sign of Life”

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 (Matthew 12:40).

Signs are an important part of life. Sometimes they can be quite frustrating like the ones that tell us how fast we can drive or where we can or can't park, but, for the most part, signs are meant for our benefit. They help us understand our surroundings, they provide important information about what we are experiencing in the world and they point us in the right direction when the things around us seem ominous and unfamiliar.

Last year, I heard a story on the radio about a reoccurring problem in California's Death Valley National Park. Apparently, many of the GPS systems on the market today have bad information about the roads in Death Valley and often, the roads that pop up on these electronic signs have been gone for years.

In 2011, that's exactly what happened to Donna Cooper and her family. The Coopers were visiting Death Valley on a day trip from their home in Nevada and after several hours in the desert they asked their GPS – which they had named “Nell” – for directions to get back home. “Nell” calculated the route and then confidently instructed the Coopers to go 550 feet and turn right. Mrs. Cooper recounted the events that followed, “Well, at 550 feet it was like a little path, and then it told us to go a quarter of a mile and turn left. There was nothing there. Nell had me running in circles for hours and hours and hours.”

One of the Death Valley rangers interviewed for the story said that this kind of thing happens several times each year and then, he was quick to point out that in 1849, Death Valley actually got its name when a wagon train from the east tried to find a shorter route to California and got lost. “Somebody had a bad map” the ranger said, “and they thought this would be a faster way to get to the gold fields.” The radio story concluded by saying that, “a search and rescue helicopter found Cooper's family after three days of being lost and, luckily, everyone in the car survived – everyone, that is, except Nell.”¹

The signs that capture our attention and guide our steps in life are critically important. And sometimes, the signs to which we give our attention can mean the difference between life and death. Throughout the season of Lent, we have been listening to God's voice in the Old Testament story of Jonah. Now, this well-known story that we often associate with a big fish may seem like an odd Easter text, but there actually is a very important connection with this day, and today, as we consider the importance of signs, we need to consider the sign of Jonah.

In Matthew 12, Jesus was confronted by the leaders of the Jewish church. He had just healed a man possessed by a demon, restoring his sight and opening his mouth after years of not being able to see or speak, and in response to this miracle of compassion the Pharisees and teachers of law attacked Jesus' motives and His authority. In a show of their own manmade authority they asked Jesus for a sign that would prove who He truly was. And this is what Jesus said in response to their misguided demand: “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given...except the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matthew 12:39).

In response to their accusations and demand for proof of His power and purpose Jesus offered only “the sign of Jonah.” As we gather this morning to celebrate the open grave and the message of life that Easter brings, it's easy to understand these words as a clear reference to Jesus' resurrection. Jonah's release from the great fish after three days must surely be the sign to which Jesus was referring. But, the sign of Jonah is more than that moment of resurrection. You see, the sign of Jonah is *all* of Jonah! Think about it:

- Jonah's sacrificial offering of himself for the deliverance of the others on the ship is part of the sign, because Jesus also gave himself as a sacrifice for our redemption.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/26/137646147/the-gps-a-fatally-misleading-travel-companion>.

- And God's abandonment of Jonah is also part of the sign, because Christ, too, was forsaken by the Father; left alone with my sin and your sin and the sin of the world nailed with Him to the cross.
- And Jonah's descent into the depths of the sea is also part of the sign of Jonah as well, because Christ also descended into the realm of the dead so that we would be freed from death.
- And then, of course, Jonah's miraculous deliverance from the belly of the fish; this too is part of the sign because, on Easter morning, Christ emerged from the belly of the earth.

Jonah and Jesus went through judgment, endured condemnation and experienced descent before they were raised to new life and, my brothers and my sisters, we are here today to proclaim and celebrate that we too have become part of the sign of Jonah because this is exactly the sequence of events for all who believe in Christ. Paul writes, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:4).

This sign of Jonah is the sign that points to forgiveness. It is the sign that points victory. It's the sign that points to restoration. And it is the sign that points us to eternal life! And as we celebrate this day of resurrection, we see sign after sign that point us home! Listen again to the signs of Easter: The stone – heavy, sealed and guarded – now rolled away from the entrance of the tomb; the messengers in dazzling white clothes; the words that recalled the predictions Jesus made about His death and His resurrection; the linen grave clothes, empty in the open grave. All of these signs point to resurrection! And all of these signs point to life! *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

And consider the other signs of Easter that surround us today: The lilies, pure and white, springing up from bulbs that once appeared dead in every way. And just two days ago, the cloth paraments on the altar and even my own stole were black as death. Today, they are a brilliant white! Today the images of sorrow are gone and the signs of new life brighten our eyes! The dirges of Good Friday have been replaced by songs of joy and that word, "Alleluia," has risen from the belly of the tomb to invite us all to praise the Lord! *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

And as we search God's Word we find even more signs of life. Listen to the words of Jesus:

- "I am the Bread of Life" (John 6:35).
- "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).
- "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

You see, each of these signs of life from God's Word points us to our Savior. Please understand this! The purpose of the Bible is not to make us better people or simply to tell us what we can and can't do. The purpose of God's Word, and the very center of our faith, is a sign of life to assure us that, in Christ, we are forgiven! That, in Christ, we have hope! That, in Christ, we have peace with God and with each other! And that, in Christ, we have a future that will last forever! This is the sign of Jonah! This is the sign of Christ!

This sign of life means that we do more than just survive each day. This sign of resurrection life means that, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us!" (Romans 8:37). It means, that we can, "rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance produces character; and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us" (Romans 5:3-5). It means that, "to live is Christ and to die is gain!" (Philippians 1:21).

My brothers and my sisters, eternal life begins right now because it has no beginning and it has no end and, in Christ, we live the life of conquerors each and every day. In the death of Jesus, we have died to sin and in His resurrection we have been raised to life – now and forever. This is the sign of Jonah. This is the sign of Christ. This is the sign of life. And this is the only sign that truly matters! *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.*

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold