

“Hearing is Believing”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 4.43-53

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we've been meandering through John's Gospel, his account of the Good News of Jesus. John is showing us that Jesus is God the Divine Word, who has become a fleshy human being like us. That's a big story! So we've been meandering. We started back in September and we're just finishing chapter 4! We've detoured to other things too. And there is no rush. Let's enjoy discovering more of who Jesus is, and what it means to entrust ourselves to him.

In May, we dug into Jesus' encounter at a well with a Samaritan woman. She brought her neighbours to him, and Jesus stayed in town for a bit. Now, let's hear as the Good News continues.

After two days in Samaria, Jesus left for Galilee. (Now Jesus himself had given evidence that a prophet has no honor in his own country.) When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, since they had been there too.

Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.

“Unless you people see signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never entrust yourselves to me.”

The royal official said, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”

“Go,” Jesus replied, “your son lives.”

The man trusted Jesus's word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy lived. When he asked the time when his son got better, they said to him, “The fever left him yesterday, at one in the afternoon.”

Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, “Your son lives.” So he and his whole household entrusted themselves to Jesus. This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee.

John 4.43-54

Adapted from the New International Version

I

Jesus has come home to the Galilee region, after making the pilgrimage south to Jerusalem for the Passover. Many others had gone too, like every year. They saw what Jesus did there. They saw him take authority over the Lord's Temple by grinding its business to a halt. They saw him baptizing. They saw other signs too.¹ So back home, they welcomed him and waited for what he would do next. But then, John who is writing this Good News, hits us with this: "*A prophet has no honor in his own country.*" That does not look promising for what's coming next.

Jesus visits Cana. Last time he was there, he had turned water into wine at a wedding. At first, only a few knew. But don't expect people to keep that sort of thing quiet! A big shot has come to town too, hoping Jesus will do something even greater. The man is important and influential, but now he is just a dad, desperate for healing for his dying son. But then, Jesus who is the Good News, hits him with this: "*Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never entrust yourselves to me.*" That does not look promising for what's coming next!

We come to God. We have heard what Jesus has done, certainly in the Bible and maybe more recently. Perhaps we have even seen it ourselves. So we come to God, as heartfelt and desperate as that dad was. What will God do? Will God give us a rebuke, a slap-down? Sometimes it feels like that, right. Or, just silence? Which does not look promising for what's coming next!

II

We know Jesus can help this begging father. You heard how it ends; the boy lives because of Jesus. So why does Jesus seem reluctant? What is troubling him, our loving Saviour, who loves that boy and his dad, and wants, for all of us, fullness of life?

People want "Signs and wonders." Spectacular displays of God's power. Astonishing performances of God's might. The audience goes "Wow!" and pour out its applause. Put "signs and wonders" on the billboard, and we'll pack them in.

That's what's troubling Jesus.

For some, it's simply entertainment. We love the show.

For some, we are at our end. All resources are exhausted, all avenues blocked, and our hopes lie crumpled. We've got advanced medicine, sophisticated diagnoses, cutting-edge treatments, and public healthcare. Yet we are flung into confusion and dreading, when the medicine can advance no further, when the sophisticated diagnoses are left shrugging their shoulders, when the cutting-edge of the treatments becomes dull and useless, and all the

¹ John 2.13-22; 2.23-25; 3.22.

money in the world means nothing. Then someone promises “signs and wonders!” Might we fling ourselves down, begging, just on the chance something will change? Wouldn’t “signs and wonders” be proof? God is real. God cares. God will do something.

Of course, such a sign, such a wonder would grab us and arrest us, take hold of us. Maybe that is what worries Jesus. That it would hold us, and we’d be stuck.

Don’t get me wrong. Healing! That would be a good place to be stuck. Amen!

But then what? What next?

III

Let’s lighten things a bit. It’s summer, and for some of us it will include camping or cottaging. One of those rainy days will come, and we’ll be stuck inside. One of those old games will come out. Like Trouble!²

*You’ve got Trouble!
Wait, don’t run.
This kind of Trouble is lots of fun!
Pop-O-Matic pops the dice.
Pop a 6, and you move twice.
Race your men around the track
and try to send the others back.³*

But I know from childhood experience that you can get so absorbed in sending the others back, you forget the point of the game. To the point is to get to the end!

Jesus knows us very well. Is he worried that we’ll get so taken by amazing wonders, we won’t keep going on, to the end, to see the point of everything he is doing?

This summer, some of you might find yourselves in the Toronto area during the Pan Am games. They’ve put up new signs, to help people find their way around. Here’s one.⁴



² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trouble_\(board_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trouble_(board_game))

³ This is the jingle the from a television advertisement for Trouble that I saw as a boy. It was obviously effective, as I still remember it by heart!

⁴ <http://www.thestar.com/content/dam/thestar/news/canada/2015/06/23/from-ajx-to-rcy-new-pan-am-street-signs-full-of-code/signs-compositejpg.jpg>

With just a few simple images, it tells us:

- parking is to the left,
- bicycle parking is straight ahead.
- it's 30 metres is the OBX. Of course that's the Oshawa Sports Centre (Yah! As if that's obviously what "OBX" stands for!)
- that's where you'll find boxing and weightlifting.

It's not a bad sign . . . unless you stay in front of it, thinking too hard to figure it out. Or, admiring its concise cleverness. The sign is not the point, but if you get stuck on it, the sign won't help at all. You'll miss the main event!⁵

Is Jesus worried we'll be so gripped by a sign and wonder he does, that we will miss what is going on? As I said, he knows us very well.

IV

Back in the story, the dad asks again. "*Sir, come down before my child dies.*" Keep asking. Persist. Bend God's ear.

He asks again . . . and Jesus shows him nothing.

But Jesus says something. And the dad hears.

Threads weave through this Gospel of John. One thread is that seeing is not as reliable as hearing. Seeing what Jesus does might impress you. Hearing what he says will change you, profoundly and deeply.

For instance, on Easter morning Mary is alone beside Jesus' empty tomb, weeping. She sees a man and mistakes him for the gardener. Yet when she hears him speak, she knows he is Jesus.

A week later, Thomas sees Jesus alive, and the crucifixion wounds, and believes. But Jesus says to him, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"⁶

Here is another way of putting it. Hearing and trusting Jesus—taking him at his word—will bring us into the light. Once we're in the light, then we will see.⁷

⁵ I've adapted examples N. T. Wright uses in John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 51-52.

⁶ John 20:24-29. Some other examples: 4:41-42 (the villagers believe in Jesus because of his word and what they had heard); 6:36 ("you have seen me and yet do not believe"); It's not that seeing is useless (see, for instance, 6:40). Rather, hearing Jesus' word is more powerfully linked to belief than is seeing his actions).

⁷ See or, better, hear the discourse in John 9, especially its ending dialogue between Jesus and some Pharisees.

The dad prays for Jesus to help. Jesus says, “*Your son lives.*” Dad hears that promise and believes Jesus. So he goes home. A day later, the promise is confirmed: his son lives! Dad’s faith, believing and entrusting himself to Jesus happens, not when he sees a miracle, a “sign and wonder.” No, he entrusts himself, and his son, when he hears Jesus’ word, Jesus’ promise.⁸

V

Remember the danger that we’ll get stuck on the signs and wonders, including the really good ones, like healing a child . . . the danger we’d get stuck and miss what’s going on, the big picture of what Jesus is doing.

In Jesus, God is restoring all of creation.

In Jesus, God is healing all of life.

In Jesus, God is doing justice so all may flourish.

In Jesus, God is reconciling all things, so peace may reign.

In Jesus, God is bringing God’s kingdom, and God’s will will be done on earth as in heaven.

Jesus is God, bringing all this about. All the things Jesus did and does are signs, pointers to all this.

If our trust in Jesus depends on the wonderful, powerful, obviously miraculous signs, though, we will miss this. Because the biggest sign Jesus pointed to . . . was himself, on a cross. And himself, rising from the tomb.⁹ The decisive sign is God the Son, not escaping death miraculously, but going through death, so he could defeat it and everything that destroys life.

The question all of us face sometime is this: Will you entrust yourself to this Jesus?

Yes, you can look at his signs. Yes, you can give praise for his wonders. Yes, you can kneel beside that dad and plea persistently for his healing.

Whatever happens, though, will you entrust yourself?

To answer that for yourself, ask this: Is Jesus trustworthy?

The dad thought so. Do you?

⁸ Wright, 53.

⁹ John 2.18-22. Elsewhere he says the sign he’ll give his contemporaries is the “sign of Jonah” which, again, refers to his death and resurrection. See Matthew 12.28-40 and 16.1-28.