

“A Sign of Things to Come”

Exodus 32:1-14

John 4:46-54

Say you're Dorothy Gale, growing up on a farm in Kansas so many years ago. The neighbor hates your dog, your aunt scolds you, and when a twister seems to come from nowhere – you don't make it to the storm shelter in time. Terrified, holding your beloved pup close, you hunker down in the house, hoping for the storm to pass. But, instead, you find yourself suddenly and quite magically transported to Oz.

What do you do in this unexpected, unfamiliar, technicolor world? Well, Dorothy does not have to wait too long to figure that one out. She is hailed as a hero by the Munchkins and warmly embraced by the Good Witch of the South. As chaotic and crazy as her life has become....all she has to do is follow the yellow brick road. It spirals out from Munchkinland, one brick after another. There is no mistaking its path – it's so easy to tell the difference between green grass and yellow brick!

Do you ever wish life were a little more like this? The good guys and bad guys are so easy to tell apart. So are the right choices and wrong choices; the path you should take and the one you should avoid. The more overwhelming things get, the more we start to really want that clear sign – we want to see God working so that we can trust that things will get better and fast!

We like to think that if things were this black and white – this clear and easy to see – that we would make the right choice every time. When we join the Hebrew people in the wilderness, though...we have cause to be a little less optimistic. Here is a people who have seen the plagues of Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, eaten manna from heaven and miraculous water, heard the words of the Ten Commandments... Even if you wanted to argue that their faith had faltered all those years that they were slaves in Egypt, it would be really, really hard to argue that now. After all

the miracles and wonders and signs that they had seen, what is going on with their faith now? Why would they beg for the golden calf? How could they still demand a sign of God?

In our Gospel lesson this morning, a royal official seeks Jesus out. His son is so weak and feverish that he is bound to his bed. The royal official comes to Jesus and begs him for healing so that his son might live. Jesus tells him, “unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” The man doesn’t answer him. He doesn’t defend his faith or lack of faith – he just asks Jesus to come to save the life of his child.

The Hebrew people couldn’t figure out the way forward without Moses leading them, so they asked for some kind of idol to lead the way. The royal official couldn’t see any other way to save his child than to appeal to Jesus’s for healing. It seems like in both cases, people thought they needed concrete signs, miracles, or wonders in order to follow – in order for their faith to be real. But the wilderness wanderers acted faithless despite the miracles they had seen. They wanted to create their own sign that they could see and steer and even control. They were faithless and, though it certainly made God mad, God was still faithful. By contrast, when we look at the royal official – Jesus told him that he wouldn’t believe without the sign, but when Jesus gave his word that the boy would live, the man believed him before he ever saw his boy restored to health.

The more chaotic things get in our lives, in our world, the more we think we need concrete signs, miracles, easily showcased divine interventions...but do we? Yes, things are hard right now and we want to have the confidence of blessed assurance, but whether we shine or whether we falter, God is faithful still.

There is a challenge to each of us in Jesus’s words – do we refuse to believe unless we see signs and wonders? Or are we refusing to see the signs and wonders that God has already set

before us because we want things to get better right away? Faith does not mean that we understand why things are the way they are. It doesn't mean that our special prayers get answered before anyone else's. Faith means that we take on the discipline to learn who God is and what God wants for all creation. It means that we learn from the scripture, from our ancestors, from the prophets, from all the sainted teachers who help us to know God better. Then, in prayer and in service, we seek to live as God's children each day of our lives.

Because the point of miracles, signs, and wonders isn't to say – my God's better than your god or to say God likes me better than you. God gave us miracles, signs, and wonders to get to know God better – to help us understand prophecy and teaching, right and wrong, healing and growth. We don't need to stand at the shore of the Red Sea to know that God is an awesome God. We don't need to call down manna from heaven to know that God nourishes and sustains us. We don't need to be on the mountain with Moses in order to listen for God's voice speaking to us still.

We do not need our own customized miracles, signs, and wonders to be people of faith. We don't have a ready-made yellow brick road. It certainly doesn't work when we try to melt gold and make our own golden calf to worship as we choose. Instead, we have a prism of promises and teachings that allow us to peer into the light of the divine, glimpsing at the strands of color contained within. We never see it fully – we never understand it utterly, but the God of all creation, the Son who chose the cross, and the Spirit that animates all life lives on in every moment. Discerning our way forward can be challenging, but everything we need to be faithful is already in our hands. Trust the promises and teaching, let go of all the things you cannot control, and know that God is fully present – even in the smallest things. For today, be awash in

the light of God, see it sparkling, dancing all around, and know that our path continues ahead together. Amen.