
My dearly beloved, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for the invitation to share this worship service with you. Always it is a delight to meet with you, and to join with you in the hymns of the church, and the reading of the scripture, and the fellowship. There is something of mystery and of miracle in a gathering of believers in the name of Jesus. He promised that however small the number, when we gather together in his name the number, and the faith, will be increased by the omnipotent power of his presence with us. No one is a stranger in the presence of the Lord, no one need fear, or feel alone, or helpless, when we gather in his name, and he adds his person to the group. Today, let us think about what really matters in this life.

Today is college day in the churches, for North Carolina Baptists. It is one of the special occasions we are asked to observe. Its purpose is to remind us of the educational mission of the church, and perhaps to encourage some highschool seniors to consider applying to one of the N.C. Baptist colleges for the higher education with a plus that they have to offer. Teaching is one of the assignsments the church has been given. At the end of Chap 12 of I Cor St Paul listed the gifts church members possess. First apostles, those who are sent to testify to the resurrection; second prophets, those who proclaim the word of God to this present generation, a function we have come to call preaching, or pastoring; and then third, teachers. Some are called to teach, but not all of us are teachers. Some are called to be the witnesses of Christ to all the nations of earth, but not all of us are set apart for that function. And some of us are called to teach all nations, but again, not all of us have that call, or that gift. Just as the body does not consist of one member, but of many, so also is the body of Xr we call the Church made up of different people with the talents and skills that are needed for the health and welfare of the group. It is that teaching ministry that we meet today to observe.

It was in Feb, 1949, that Arthur Miller's play Death of a Salesman was produced in New York. It is a tragedy of misdirected energies and warped values, and it is profoundly religious in its total impact. A few yrs ago it was revived, with Dustin Hoffman playing the lead. So spiritually moving was the performance that when the curtain fell upon the actors looking at the grave of the salesman, people sat weeping in the theatre. In that climactic scene there are some meaningful words from Biff, the eldest son of the salesman. To his brother, he said, our father doesn't know who we are...We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house. And a bit later he said, suddenly he stopped running away with the pen he had stolen. What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am.

To know who we are, is the most important bit of knowledge we can ever know. Why can't I know who I am? Biff asked. Who am I? To answer that question is the purpose of learning, and to answer it we need all the wisdom and all the experience that other human beings have collected and preserved for us. I know some things about myself, some of them I do not like to think about, but knowing who I am is another matter. I know I cannot run a mile in 4 minutes. It would put me to bed for a week if I had to run a mile in 40 minutes. I cannot paint the Sistine chapel ceiling, or compose the G Minor Symphony, or write the great American novel. I know that I am a sinner who is forgiven by the amazing grace of a loving God, and that I am always standing in the need of prayer. But I am also, as are we all, a thinking being, and a feeling being. It is the heart, and the mind, that we must educate to know and to feel the things that really matter.

There is another thing that really matters, and that is my obligation to God. The text is from Exod 20, 1-6. If I had to list the thing that mattered most in this life, here is where I would begin. The first commandment is put first because it is the most important thing in life. Until we decide what we will put first in our lives, we do not have purpose or goal toward which to grow. And it matters what that first thing is. We are made in such fashion that we can worship only one God. No God worthy of our total commitment will tolerate only part of our worship. Nor should we wish for a God who would share our worship with any other. We cannot serve God and Mammon, the spirit of things. We cannot serve God and self, or greed, or lust, or laziness. If God is truly supreme in our inmost being, then we know him to be fully satisfying, totally assuring, finally to be trusted. If God is alpha and omega, first and last, present before the creation, and present after the last atom has expired, then we can do no other than to confess him, and serve him, with all our beings. To worship one God is to put ultimate trust into the keeping of that God.

The purpose of religious education is to teach us how to know the truth, how to choose the one God over all the competing gods. There is a difference between ignorance and simplicity, or childlikeness. We can know God, as children know that the world is a friendly place, or that parents will care for them. That is simplicity. But ignorance may lead us to worship that which is passing, or limited, even destructive. There, education is the answer. There is a line in
the Philippian letter that can help us here.

Phil 4: 8:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there be any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

That is the challenge of the secular education. There is not a word in that sentence that could not have been inscribed over the entrance to Plato's academy, or Aristotle's Lyceum. In it is everything that we call liberal education. The good, the true, and the beautiful, the just and the praiseworthy, it is all here. Paul assures us that we should not spurn the learning of the world, for it has value. It can help us to know the shortcomings of the half-gods, and the idols. But that is not the end of learning. Blaise Pascal said that the last duty of reason was to confess that what really matters is beyond the scope of reason. For look what Paul added to his curriculum of classical learning:

Phil 4: 9:

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, go.

There is a great difference between one sentence and the next. One expresses admiration for the learning that makes us civilized, the other for the faith that makes us Xn. One we are commanded to think about, the other we are invited to do. The liberal education, of art and music and theatre and philosophy and poetry and the world of ideas, that we think about. The gospel of God incarnate in the son, the only-begotten son, Jesus our Lord, who suffered and died and was raised again from the dead, that is what we do, the way we live, the God in whom we place our ultimate trust.

Who am I? Who are you? We are minds and hearts that respond to the beauty of a sunset, or a poem, or a phrase of music. The more we know of the enduring achievements of human mind and spirit, the richer we are in the things that matter.

But we are made to find ourselves only when we are bound in faith to the God who made us that way. St. Augustine's prayer has it: thou has made us for thyself, O Lord; and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee. That is the highest learning, for it has the power to save us from the world that is passing away, and from ourselves when we think we can make it without God. When God said, thou shalt have no other gods before me, he gave us a simple yet profound rule for joyful living. It is my prayer that all of us may witness to the world that God, in the highest and most full, has happened to us.

My dearly beloved, it is good that we are gathered together in this place to honor those among us who are full of years and long of life. There is ample evidence in the record that the people of God have respect for parents, and teachers, and the elderly. For everything there is a season, the Preacher taught, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what was planted. Teach us to number our days, the psalmist prayed, that we may get a heart of wisdom. Honor is due to those whose experience has taught love, and joy, and patience, and faith and wisdom. But let us agree at the outset that our God is God of all ages, and all nations. In Xr there is no east or west, no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, neither male nor female, neither young nor old nor in-between. We are all one in Xr, J, all in need of salvation by the gracious goodness of God, through faith. None of us can know how far along the pathway we have walked, or how near we are to judgment and admission to God's presence. We can all rest in the certainty that, as St. Augustine said, whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's. What matters, therefore, is that all of us, on all of the rungs of life's ladder, know the love of God. A thousand years are as but yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. (and that in God's sight) It is life that matters; life, and the faith that is its foundation. How we know the God who is our dwelling place, whose everlasting arms are beneath us, that is what makes a difference in the peace that is our heritage.

It is a fundamental of the Hebr-Xn faith that God reveals his nature to us, and that we can know nothing of God but what God shows us. Through the ages, in many different ways, God has reached out to touch us with his presence. The writer to the Hebrs began the ltr with the reminder that in the past God had spoken by the prophets, but now God has spoken to us by a Son. That is the proclamation the Church makes to the world. In the Son we have the perfect revelation, for in him we know to the fullest the love of God for us. In his broken body the wall of separation was broken down, and we may without fear draw near to God. Whether young or old, whether man or woman, whatever be our accidental condition, we all need that assurance. We have it when we see with the eyes of faith. All about us are evidences of the divine presence. It may be in the laughter of a small child, or the shine in the eyes of someone we love, or in the prayer of a mother. The German astronomer Johannes Kepler once came from his telescope with the words, I have been thinking the thoughts of God after him. To Kepler the heavens were telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaimed his handiwork. The poet Robert Browning wrote that God may speak through a sunset touch, a fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death, or a chorus-ending from Euripides. To Browning, as to others who are sensitive to the beauty around us, God speaks through the emotions. Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it differently. Earth's crammed with heaven, she wrote. Every common bush afire with God; and only he who sees takes off his shoes. The question for us is whether we can see, and know the world to be a holy place, because of the incarnation of God in human flesh. Always we face the temptation to doubt the presence of God. It is a mark of our stubborn and intractable wills that we want to put God to the test. Prove yourself to us, we say. Show us who you are, and what you are. So we demand God, as if we were masters, and God our servant, as though we were certain of ourselves, and God had something to prove to us. Unless we can see the nailprints in your hand, or find the wreckage of Noah's ark, or the true grave shroud, we will not believe. We will denounce you as a fraud.

That attitude was background to an instructive incident in the life of Jesus. One day some people brought to him a blind and dumb person, and J healed him. The man spoke and saw. It was an amazing thing, at which people marvelled. It ought to have been convincing proof that in J was the presence of the divine. But the religious experts of the day declared that it was by the power of the evil one, that J did such miracles. It led to those words of J about a house divided against itself cannot stand. If he could drive out Satan by the power of Satan, then the house of evil falls. If by the Spirit of God he cast out demons, then it was a sign that the Kingdom of God had already come among us. In the messianic age, the power of evil is broken. The Kingdom of God is the old creation redeemed. But the skeptics demanded more. Matt 12: 38-40. Why should the most active religionists ask for a sign when they had just witnessed a miracle of healing? Because they were human beings, even as we are. They did not want to believe what they saw, even when they demanded to see, so they could believe. Seeing is believing, they were saying, by implication. Not so. Seeing is seeing, but believing is knowing for certain when we cannot see. Teacher, they said to J, we wish to see a sign from you. Do something big, and astounding, so we will know the truth, and not have to make our way by faith alone. They did not understand what faith is. Truth was not truth unless they had proof that was acceptable to our sense-perceptions. How often do we, too, demand of God a sign? of healing, or of peace on our terms.
But God does not act that way. In the incident we read, Christ rejected the demand for a sign. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, he said. It was an evil generation, and it was also adulterous. But it was also a generation, not too different from other generations we might mention, because it broke the command by following after false gods, and by not recognizing the truth. Apostasy is the sin of unbelievers. So, imagine that J had worked an enormous miracle to prove something to that crowd. Would they have dismissed it as just another hoax, or brushed it aside as a delusion of their vision? or would they have demanded a still greater wonder?

Then J told them that, while he would give them no sign, they already had a sign, and it was the only sign that or any generation would receive. It was the sign of Jonah. As Jonah was 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the whale--and that's the way Matt wrote it, making the same error many of us make about that celebrated fish--so will the Son of Man be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth.

Because that is the only sign we are given, and because we so badly want a sign of proof, let us look at it closely, and thoughtfully. It is in two parts. First, there is the sign of Jonah. That means prophetic preaching that brought repentance to a pagan city. Jonah did not want those wicked people to repent. You remember that he took ship in the exact opposite direction. But when he got to Nineveh he offered no evidence to the people. He preached what God gave him to preach. He preached sin, and the human need to confess it, and to weep over it, and to ask forgiveness for it. And that is the sign, the only sign, we have. Whether we are among those fortunate people to whom, as Christopher Morley put it, youth no longer has any terrors, or whether youth has pursued us well into the advanced decades, that is the sign. Preaching that breaks into our private persons, preaching that breaks down our defenses, and our rationalizations, and our self-delusions, is the sign that God cares for us, and is at work among us. How can they believe unless they hear, and how can they hear without a preacher?

Then, there is the other aspect of the Jonah-sign. It is the resurrection of Xr from the dead. To Matt, the story of Jonah swallowed by that great fish was a type of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The central proclamation of Xty is, he is risen. The meaning of the agape-love-feast is the celebration of the broken bread, in which we see the symbol of the broken body, and are reminded of the suffering and the sacrifice. It is the sign of the love of God, who sent his only begotten son, who cared enough to send the very best, for us. So the sign, the only sign, is Jesus Christ himself. Any other physical evidence of God's presence with us would win our eyes, but lose our souls.

When we ask the Teacher to give us a sign, he offers us only one. It is the sign of Jonah, and that is the sign of the cross. Jonah was preacher, and Jonah was in the fish, and Jonah was miraculously restored to light and life. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, for unto us a Son is given. To Xns, the sign of proof is the living Christ in lives and hearts, and in the peace which comes when we cast ourselves by faith upon the boundless mercies of God. At any age, that is gospel. That is good news. Amen.

It is a fundamental assertion of the Hebr-Xn faith that our God reveals His nature to us, and that all we can know of God is what God shows us. God wants his creatures to know His love and care, and through the ages, in many different ways, God has reached out to touch us with His presence. The writer to the Hebrews began his letter with the reminder that in the past God has spoken by the prophets, but now, in these latter days, God has spoken to us by a Son. That is our heritage, and that is the proclamation the Church makes to the world. In the Son we have perfected wisdom, and in him we know the love of God for us. God continues to reach out to us. The revelation continues beyond the century that produced our scriptures. The wall of separation was broken down, in the broken body, and now we may without fear draw near to the majesty of God. How do we know God? In many ways, if we will but see with the eyes of faith. It may be in the laughter of a small child, or the shine in the eyes of someone we love, or in the dimly-remembered prayer of a mother, or an example of courage in the face of temptation or community pressures to conform to its ways. The German astronomer Johannes Kepler once came from his telescope with the words, I have been thinking the thoughts of God after him. To Kepler, and to other astronomers, the heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. God made the universe, and it is perfectly ordered and harmonious. That is a message about the nature of God. The poet Robert Browning wrote that God may speak through a sunset touch, a fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death, a chorus-ending from Euripides. To Browning, and to others who are sensitive to the beauty around us, and to the limited time which is ours, God spoke through human emotions. To others, God speaks through time, or in history, or in a musical chord that we cannot forget. In many ways there comes to us the still small voice of God. Earth's crammed with heaven, Mrs. Robert Browning wrote. Every common bush afire with God; and only he who sees takes off his shoes. Not just the burning bush that Moses saw in the desert, but every common bush a voice of God. The question for us is whether we see, and take off our shoes, because we are standing on holy ground in every part of God's world. Always we face the temptation to doubt the voice of God. It is a mark of our intractable and stubborn wills that we want to put God to the test. Prove yourself to us, we say, like small children. Show us who you are, and what you are. We challenge God, we taunt God, as if we were masters and God our servant. Unless we can see the nailprints in your hand, and the wound in your side, we will not believe. Give us evidence for our senses, because believing is too great a risk for us. Show us the rotted wood of Noah's ark, or a piece of the true cross, or the grave shroud, or we will denounce you as a fraud. Give us proof.

That attitude was the background to an instructive incident in the life of J. One day some people brought to him a blind and dumb person, and J healed him. The man spoke and saw. It was an amazing thing, and people marvelled at it. It ought to have convinced people that in this man dwelt the presence of the divine. The religious experts of that day declared that it was by the power of the evil one that J did such miracles. Like Dr. Faustus, he had sold his soul to Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies, who in turn gave him power to drive out demons. It led, as you remember, to those words of J about a Kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation. If Satan cast out Satan, then is the house of evil divided against itself, and cannot stand. But, said J, if by the Spirit of God I cast out demons, then you and I should recognize in that a sign that somehow the Kingdom of God has already come among us. In the messianic age, the power of evil will be broken. The Kingdom of God is the creation redeemed. The driving out of the demon in the unfortunate man spoke of God's nature. But to the skeptics it was not enough. Matt 12:38-40. Why should the most active religionists ask for a sign when they had just witnessed a miracle of healing? Because they were human beings, even as we are. They did not want to believe what they saw, even when they demanded to see so they could believe. Those Pharisees made an error that is common among us. Seeing is believing, they were saying, by implication. Not so. Seeing is seeing, believing is knowing even where we cannot see. Teacher, they said to him, we wish to see a sign from you. They wanted something big, like reaching up and plucking a glittering star from the heavens, or causing a mountain to move, or perhaps to make bread from stones, or fly through their hair just by wishing it. They did not understand the meaning of faith, no more than do some of us. Truth was not truth to them unless they had the proof through their sense-perceptions. Give us a sign; give us proof to our eyes, and ears, and nose, and touch. How often do we, too, ask God for a sign? of healing, or of peace on our terms rather than God's terms, or of power and success to our country, or our tribe. Show us, God, and then we will believe.
But there is the other aspect of the Jonah-sign. That is the resurrection of Christ from the dead. To Matt the story of Jonah and that fish was a type of the death, burial, and resurrection. The central proclamation of the Xn to the world is, he is risen. The central meaning of the agape-love-feast is the broken bread, in which we see the broken body. It is the sign of the love of God. So the greatest sign is Jesus Christ himself. Any other physical evidence of God's presence would win our eyes, but lose our souls.

Imagine that I had worked a miracle to prove the presence of the divine. Would they not have dismissed it as another hoax, another example of the power of Satan used to deceive us? They had already done that; as we have the record it was just a few minutes before they asked for a sign. Or they would have said that their senses deceived them; it was done with mirrors, it is voodoo economics, it isn't real. Or they would have chortled in glee at some small ordinary trick, and demanded a still more impossible wonder. It is true of a sensational expression of religion that the claims must be increasingly enlarged to satisfy the public demand for the unexpected. It is impossible to change the mind of an evil and adulterous generation寻求一种迹象，它既邪恶又不忠，但它也背叛了神，这世代也是不忠的，这世代违背了神的命令，崇拜外邦的神，不承认真理。悖逆是不信之人的罪。没有什么能够说服他们。

Imagine that I had worked a miracle to prove the presence of the divine. Would they not have dismissed it as another hoax, another example of the power of Satan used to deceive us? They had already done that; as we have the record it was just a few minutes before they asked for a sign. Or they would have said that their senses deceived them; it was done with mirrors, it is voodoo economics, it isn't real. Or they would have chortled in glee at some small ordinary trick, and demanded a still more impossible wonder. It is true of a sensational expression of religion that the claims must be increasingly enlarged to satisfy the public demand for the unexpected.

Then I gave my critics a sign, the only sign that or any generation will receive. It is the sign of Jonah. As Jonah was 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the whale— and that's the way Matt wrote it, making the same error many of us make about that celebrated fish— so will the Son of man be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth. Because that is the only sign we are given, and because we so badly want a sign of proof, let us look at it closely. First, there is the sign of Jonah. That means prophetic preaching that brought repentance to a pagan city. Jonah offered no other evidence to the people of Nineveh. He just preached. He preached sin, and the need to confess it, and weep over it, and ask forgiveness for it. And that is the sign, the only sign, we have. When we hear preaching that breaks into our private persons, and breaks down our defenses, and our rationalizations, and our self-delusions, that is the sign that God is at work. How can people believe unless they hear, and how can they hear without a preacher? How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring glad tidings.

But there is the other aspect of the Jonah-sign. That is the resurrection of Christ from the dead. To Matt the story of Jonah and that fish was a type of the death, burial, and resurrection. The central proclamation of the Xn to the world is, he is risen. The central meaning of the agape-love-feast is the broken bread, in which we see the broken body. It is the sign of the love of God. So the greatest sign is Jesus Christ himself. Any other physical evidence of God's presence would win our eyes, but lose our souls.

When we ask the teacher to give us a sign, he offers only one. It was the sign of Jonah. Jonah the preacher, and Jonah in the fish, and then miraculously brought out into life. To Xns, the sign of proof is the living Christ in lives and hearts, and in the peace that comes when we cast ourselves by faith upon the boundless mercies of God. Amen.
It is a fundamental assertion of the Hebr-Xn faith that God reveals his nature to us, and that all we can know of God is what God shows us of Himself. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth said it clearly. "The Gospel is not a relig msg to inform mankind of their divinity or to tell them how they may become divine. The Gospel proclaims a God utterly distinct from men. Salvation comes to them from Him, because they are, as men, incapable of knowing Him, and because they have no right to claim anything from Him." Karl Barth made it clear that we are dependent upon God for all the knowledge of the eternal that we have. It is evidence of the love of God that He wants his creatures to know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the life which he wants us to live. If God hides himself, if God runs away from us, it is in order that we shall seek to know him, and to find him, for God has made us for himself alone. Our souls are restless until they rest in him. Through the ages, in many different ways, God has drawn aside the veils which hide His nature, to touch us with his presence. The writer of the ltr to the Hebrews began with the reminder that in the past God has spoken by the prophets, but now, in these latter days, God has spoken to us by a Son. That is the proclamation the Church makes to the world. In the Son we have perfected wisdom, and in him we know the height, and depth, and length, and breadth, of God's love for us; that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Into our own time God reaches out to make himself known to humankind. The wall of separation was broken down, in the broken body, and we may now draw near to Him. 'Still, in our uncertainty, and in our doubts, we come with the question, How do we know God? Are we, as human beings, incapable of knowing Him who made us? and can we, as creatures, have a right to claim anything from God? The answer is Yes, but only as God makes the contact. We can see God in many ways, if we will look in faith. It may be in the laughter of a small child, or the shine in the eyes of someone we love, or in the dimly-remembered prayer of a mother, or an example of courage in the face of temptation. The German astronomer Johannes Kepler once came from his telescope with the words, I have been thinking the thoughts of God after Him. To Kepler, and to other astronomers, the heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims His handiwork. God made the universe, and it is perfectly ordered, and harmonious. That is a truth about the universe, but even more important it is a truth about God. The poet Robert Browning wrote that God may speak through a sunset touch, a fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death, or a chorus-ending from Euripides. To Browning, and to others who are sensitive to the beauty that is about us, God makes Himself known through the emotions. In many ways there comes to us the still small voice of God. Mrs. Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, said that. Earth's crammed with heaven, she wrote, every common bush afire with God, and only he who sees takes off his shoes. Not just the burning bush that Moses saw in the desert, but every common bush a message from God to us. The question for us is whether we see, and take off our shoes, because in every part of God's world we are standing on holy ground. It is that which we find hard to believe. Always we face the temptation to doubt the voice of God. It is the mark of our stubborn wills that we want to put God to the test. Prove yourself to us, we say, like small children. Show us who you are, and what you are. We challenge God, we taunt God, as if we were masters, and God our servant. Unless we see the nailprints in your hands, and the wound in your side, we will not believe. Give us evidence we can touch, and see, because believing is too great a risk for us. Show us the rotted wood of Noah's ark, or a piece of the true cross, or the grave shroud, or we will denounced you as a fraud. We want proof.

That attitude was the background for an instructive incident in the life of J. One day some people brought to him a blind and dumb person, and J healed him. The man saw, and spoke. It was a miracle, and people marvelled at it. It ought to have convinced them that in this preacher dwelt the presence of the divine. But no; the relig experts of that day declared that it was by the pwr of the evil one, that J did such miracles. Like Dr. Faustus, they said, he has sold his soul to Satan, who in return gave him power to drive out demons. It led, as you remember, to those words of J about a house divided against itself, and cannot stand. If Satan casts out the angels of Satan, then the house of evil divided against itself, and it cannot stand. But, said J, and this is the important part of the teaching, but if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then it means that the Kgdm of God has come among us. In the messianic age, the pwr of evil will be broken. The Kgdm of God is the original creation redeemed of its flaws. The driving out of the demon who possessed that unfortunate man was a revelation of God's nature, and God's presence among us. But to the skeptics it was not enough. It is at that point that we come to the text for the morning. Matt 12: 38-40. Why should the most active religionists of that day demand a sign when they had just witnessed a miracle of healing? Because they
were human beings, even as we are. They did not want to believe what they saw, even when they demanded to see, so they could believe. They made an error that is common among us. Seeing is believing, they were saying. Not so. Seeing is seeing, believing is knowing even when we cannot see. Teacher, they said to him, we wish to see a sign from you. They wanted something big, like reaching up to pluck a glittering star from the heavens, or making a mountain move from here to there, or perhaps to make bread from stones. They did not understand the meaning of faith. Truth was not truth to them unless they could see it, and touch it, and smell it, and hear it. Give us a sign. How often do we make the same demand? Show us, by healing a loved one who is ill and in pain. Give us peace on our terms, give us power and wealth, do something magic. Show us, and then we will believe. But God does not work that way. Christ rejected the demand for a sign. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, he replied. It was a group of people who broke the commandments, who followed after false gods, who denied their creaturehood. Nothing could be done to convince them. Imagine, if you will, that J had worked a miracle to prove his power, and his nature. Would they not have dismissed it as another hoax, another example of the power of Satan used against Satan? Or they might have said that their eyes deceived them; it was done with mirrors, it was voodoo economics, it isn't real. Or they might have demanded still more impossible wonder, and after that still another more fantastic yet. The world demands solution to problems which then become themselves problems. God offers serenity and inward peace with the problem unresolved.

Then J gave his critics a sign, the only sign that any generation will receive. It is the sign of Jonah. It is in two parts. Jonah himself, and then, as Matt alone recorded, as Jonah was 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth. I have only time to make passing reference to Matt's error about that big fish in the Jonah story. It was not a whale, as all of you know, but that's what Matt called it in the story. But the saying itself is of great importance. Because we want a sign of proof, and because this is the only sign we are given, let us look at it closely. First, there is the sign of Jonah. That means prophetic preaching that breaks into our private persons, preaching that breaks down our defenses, and our self-delusions, and convicts us of sin. That is what Jonah did in Nineveh. He preached, and that is the sign that God is at work, that God cares, that God wants us to know Him, and the power of his resurrection. How can people believe unless they hear, and how can they hear without a preacher? How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring glad tidings. Support your preacher, for what he does from week to week, in this place, is the sign we seek.

But there is the other aspect of the Jonah-sign. It is the resurrection of Xr from the dead. The story of Jonah and that big fish was a type of death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord. It is the central proclamation of the Xn to the world. If he be not risen from the dead, then we have no hope, and no future, and no reason to obey the commandments of righteousness. The central meaning to the Lord's Supper is the broken body, which we see in the broken bread. It is the sign of the love of God. The greatest and most meaningful sign is Jesus Christ Himself. Any other physical evidence of God's presence would win our eyes, but lose our souls.

When we ask God to give us a sign, he offers only one. It is the sign of Jonah. Jonah the preacher, and Jonah in the fish, and then miraculously brought out again into life. To Xns, the sign of proof is the living Xn in lives and hearts, and in the peace that comes to us when we throw ourselves by faith upon the mercies of God. Amen.
We live in a world of uncertainty, and deep inside us there is a yearning for something we can hold to—something we can depend upon. We live in a world in which there is on every hand the urgency of crisis, and deep inside us there is a longing for serenity and peace. We live in a world which often hurts us, which deals out undeserved pain and defeat, and deep inside us there is a desire to be comforted and protected. It is in the conflict between the world we live in, and the feelings that are deep within us, that an abiding faith in God offers what we want, and what we need, in the lives we live in these busy and stressful days. Let us rest our tired and bruised souls in the precious promises which we have in this book of faith. As an example, I offer one of the best-beloved passages in scripture, the 23nd Psalm. Through the centuries these few lines have been the favorite words of millions of people. Many people have quoted these precious promises as they faced the end of their pilgrimage upon this earth. Others have said these lines as they confronted a crisis, or a problem, or a hurt. Some quote the 23rd Psalm as a supreme example of poetry, and place it among the most polished of human literary expressions. All who read it, of whatever age, or whatever the circumstances, find in the comfort of these ideas what their restless souls need for peace and inward health. It breathes confidence and triumph because it is filled with a simple and uncomplicated faith that God is good and that whatever I am called upon to face, with God’s help I can handle it. It is a reminder to each of us to give thanks every day of our lives for the never-failing goodness of God. The strongest appeal of the poem is its unflinching look at reality. This is no fair-weather faith, that is strong and beautiful when the sun is shining, and fades when the storms blow about us. It is instead a faith for all seasons, for the bright as well as the dark shadows, for the dependable as well as for the uncertainties, for the enemy who seeks to do us harm as well as for the friend who offers us food and drink even in the face of hostility. It is therefore honest, and in it there is nothing to hide. There is a story of an elderly woman who lay dying. Her minis­ter came to visit, and asked her if she feared to cross the river. No, she replied, my Master owns both banks of the river, and where he is, I am safe. That is what this Psalm tells us, in language so clear and simple that the youngest among us can understand, and so deep and ever-lasting that the oldest, and most learned, find in it priceless jewels, and the precious promise. The psalm is a model of clarity and order, yet it is in two parts. Par 1, vv. 1-4, tells us of God as shepherd of the sheep; v. 5 changes the poetic image to the good host, which is similar to the good shepherd; and the final verse brings the two pictures of God together. But although there are the two descriptions of God’s love and protection for us, they are woven together so that they appear to be the same exact action. The good shepherd is the good host, and the good host is the good shepherd.

Let us look more closely at the promises which are here. The opening five words give us the assurance our souls long for. The Lord is my shepherd. Throughout the Bible, and in all of religious language, we find the careful watch the shepherd keeps over the young lambs used as a synonym for God’s care for us. In John 10 we hear Jesus saying his version of this psalm: I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, and I lay down my life for the sheep. That lovely poem in Isa 40 says it: he will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. Can you understand what that meant to a people defeated, and taken away into exile, in the land of Babylon, far from the temple, and the promised land? It brings tears to the eyes to read that the Lord is my shepherd, and will feed his flock, and gather the lambs in his arms. Now let us put the emphasis upon the pronoun. The Lord is MY shepherd. Our God is creator of all the vast universe, and he is lawgiver to the world, and he is in control of history. But he is MY shepherd, and that is a comfort to me. When you say those precious words, remember to emphasize the pronoun. That is the promise that faith offers to us. And the rest of the sentence follows. I shall not want. Now we need to understand what that means. It does not mean wealth, or financial security, or no problems in life. But when we talk about the strength to confront everything that our world can throw at us, then we can say, I shall not want. When we talk about the hope that saves, then we can know that we are supplied. When we talk about the peace that passes all understanding deep inside our hidden hearts, then we can breathe that precious promise—I shall not want. These shall not fail, because the Lord is MY shepherd. Now see that shepherd as the good host. He makes us lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. Green is the most restful of all colors, and in a desert land the color people most see is a harsh yellow. But the good shepherd finds the green pastures, that gives us the rest our troubled hearts yearn for. He makes me lie down. That is what weariness is for. That is what illness is. It is the opportunity to relax, and let our bodies catch up with the world. We are too much in a hurry. Certainly we must work, for the night is coming, when no man can work. And no woman.
How does the old saying put it—man may work from sun to sun, but woman's work is never done. But rest is balm for the weary. Some yrs ago there was a professional golfer who said it well: his name was Snead. Do not hurry, do not worry, stop and smell the flowers. Rest is so necessary that the good shepherd MAKES us lie down. The word sabbath means rest. We would work better if we had a sabbath hour every day, and if we had time for talk, and meditation, and to smell the flowers. But rest is not all we need. V.3, he restores my soul. Ah, there is what we need. We may have no scars on our skin, but many of us have scars on our souls. We need soul healing; we need soul restoration. Here it is. It is a precious promise. He leadeth me, there is a hymn that reminds us of that. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness, for his name's sake. The good shepherd will not mislead us. Only when we stray from his protection do we meet temptation and the unrighteous. But there are other dangers we must pass through, in the valley of deep darkness where there is the shadow of death across the path. Note that the still waters, and the lying down in green pastures, come before the darkness. We restore our souls, in worship, and in prayer, and in rest, because ahead of us there are the dangers. But another precious promise—I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. There is not richer promise than the promise of God's presence. Come what may, for good or ill, in sickness and in health, in poverty and in wealth, we have the promise of the presence. And that drives away the fear of evil. It brings the comfort we need. In the presence of all that life can do to us, the good host prepares a table before us; he anoints our head with oil, and he fills the cup until it overflows, so warm and loving is his hospitality. And then the soothing conclusion—Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me, for the good shepherd, and the good host, meet all of our needs. We shall dwell all of our days, as long as we live, forever, in the presence of our God.

We live in a world of uncertainty, and deep inside us there is a yearning for something we can cling to. We live in a world of trouble, and crisis, and deep inside us there is a longing for serenity and peace. We live in a world which can hurt us, and can defeat us, and deep inside of us we wish to be comforted and protected. In these beautiful words, of simple faith, there is our answer. These are precious promises, which are given to us out of God's bounty. May we all take them, and believe them, and live in the strong but tender presence of God. Deut 33:27: The eternal God is your everlasting dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

Now to the One who is able to strengthen you according to the gospel and in preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith -- to the only wise God be glory evermore through Jesus Christ. Go in peace; may God preserve and keep you this day and for ever. Amen.
My dearly beloved, we live in a world of uncertainty, and deep inside us is a yearning for something we can hold to, something we can depend upon. We live in a world in which there is on every hand the urgency of crisis, but deep inside us is a longing for serenity and peace. We live in a world which often hurts us, which deals out undeserved pain and defeat, and deep inside us there is a desire to be comforted and protected. It is in the midst of the conflicts between the world we live in, and the feelings we have deep inside us, that an abiding, childlike faith in God promises us what we need. Let us rest our tired bodies and bruised souls in the precious promises we find in the book of faith. As an example, hear the words of one of the best-beloved poems in all of human literature. Psa. 23. Through the centuries these words have been the favorite reading for millions of people. Many have quoted the precious promises and the calm certainty as they faced the conclusion of their pilgrimage on earth. Others have recalled these lines as they faced a crisis, or a problem, or a hurt. It breathes confidence and triumph because it is filled with a simple and uncomplicated faith that God is good, and God cares for us, and that whatever we are called upon to face we can handle it with the ever-present help of God. The strongest appeal of the poem is its unflinching look at the real world in which we all live. It is no sugary promise of blue skies and fair weather and no storms to beat upon us. It is a call to trust God in all seasons, sunshine or cloud, light or dark, in the midst of comfort or of crisis. A minister asked an elderly person, Are you afraid the cross the river? No, came the answer, my Father owns both banks of the river, this side and that side, and where God is, there I am safe. This is the precious promise of the 23rd Psalm. Let us look at it more closely, to know once again the faith that makes us whole, and gets us through the day, and through the night watches. The opening five words stand among the unforgettable statements in all of human thought. The Lord is my shepherd. Throughout the Bible, in all of religious language, the image of the shepherd watching over the flocks is a poetic symbol of God's care for us, who are the sheep of his pasture. In John 10 Jesus quoted the psalm to make himself the good shepherd: I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, and I lay down my life for my sheep. The prophet, in Isa 40:11 also said it: He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those who are with young. Last wk, in Scotland, there were the world contest to test the training of sheep dogs. It is a rigorous and demanding course; in 30 minutes the collie dog must respond to the whistled signals of its owner to bring together stragglers who have strayed from the flock, they must lead them over a lengthy course, and must separate 10 sheep from the flock, those which wear a ribbon. Last wk only three dogs in all the world completed the course. Nearly half a century ago I was in England. One day on a rocky heath I stood in amazement to see a shepherd call to his sheep dog, who corrected the wayward, and kept the flock together as they fed upon the sparse green plants on the hill. That, said the psalmist, is what God is like. Now let us put emphasis upon the pronoun. The Lord is MY shepherd. God is a shepherd, in poetic imagery, but He is more than that: he is MY shepherd. God, who created this vast universe, who created something out of nothing; who gave life, and then to redeem his people became himself part of the creation; that God who was before the creation, without whom not anything was made that was made; that God is no impersonal maker who forgets what he has made. God is MY shepherd. We say that every night to ourselves, and it is in that possessive pronoun that we find comfort. On that basis, the rest of the sentence follows—I shall not want. We need to understand what that means. In American English, want means desire, to crave something we do not have. Here the original Hebrew is translated with the English English, where want means need, to be without something necessary to existence. This plant wants water, the English would say; we would say, this plant needs water. So to say, the Lord is MY shepherd, I shall not be without anything I need, is the precious promise of the psalm. It is not a guarantee of wealth in material terms, nor does it tell us we shall have no problems to face. But when we talk about strength to face whatever the day may bring, then we hear the promise—the Lord is MY shepherd, I shall not lack what I need. When we talk about the hope which makes life sweet, then we know that it will be supplied in full measure. When we ask for the inner peace that passes all understanding deep inside our hearts, then we hear the precious promise: I shall not need. These shall not fail, because the Lord is MY shepherd. In that is our faith, and our hope, and our love. In these beautiful words, of simple faith, as clear and as unshakeable as the confidence of a small child, there is the answer to our yearning for certainty, and peace, and victory over life and death, May we take them, and believe them, and live them, in the strong, tender presence of a loving God. Deut 33:27: the Eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.
Now to the One who is able to strengthen you according to the Gospel and in preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith -- to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ. Go in peace; may God preserve and keep you this day and for ever. Amen.