

God's signs always point to God's Word. St. Paul says that Jews look for signs and Greeks look for wisdom. The cross of Jesus is the sign and wisdom God gives. However, it's a stumbling block to those who look for a sign, and it's foolishness to those who look for wisdom. You see, we naturally look for signs that satisfy our own understanding of how we think things should work out. We naturally look for wisdom that agrees with our own thoughts. But God gives signs that point to his Word, the true wisdom and redemption of our Savior.

Jesus' miracles are also called signs. They signify something. They signify what he has done and what he has promised to do. His first miracle was in Cana of Galilee at a wedding feast. By turning water into wine, Jesus signified that he, the only true God and Creator of all things, has made man, both male and female, in his image. He is the very Image of God, the true Bridegroom who came to lay his life down for his bride, the church. He approves of marriage, blessing it with his presence and his miraculous supply of wine. By this sign, he pointed to his promise of salvation, which he freely bestows on husbands, wives, and children. He defends the widow and cares for the fatherless. He calls us into his Father's family forever.

These signs don't come about in the way we would expect them to come about. They don't happen at our own command or our own preparations. They only come about because of God's will. They therefore teach us to rely only on his Word and to wait for him to act. If God lays a heavy cross on you, then this is a sign he uses to teach you. He teaches you by this affliction to wait for him to lift the burden off your shoulders. In other words, he is teaching you to rely upon his Word and promise. Let's consider a few of these crosses, which God lays upon us.

If there is a particular sin or temptation you are fighting against, and it seems like it won't ever go away, then God is teaching you to hope in and wait upon his word of grace. He's teaching you to rely on Christ who was tempted in every way you are tempted except without sin. He's teaching you to draw strength from God, who declares you righteous and free from the devil's tyranny. If you are being slandered, attacked, or in any way persecuted for confessing the Word of God, then this is a sign God uses to teach you kindness and humility. By this sign, God teaches you not to fear those who can only harm your body. Instead, fear him who, having every right to condemn your soul forever, laid his life down for you and does not count your sins against you. And if you or your loved one are facing sickness or death, then God is using this sign to teach you how to face death. His Word says that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. Death is a sign of God's wrath, but God wants you to face this so that you would learn to rely only on Christ who bore God's wrath, carried your sin, and defeated death forever.

The first sign God gives is the sign of his cross. Before Jesus turned water into wine, the wedding feast first had to experience a shortage of wine. They first needed to face the embarrassment of not having enough so that they would learn to rely upon everything Jesus said. This is why Mary told the stewards to do whatever the Lord told them to do. So it is with all the signs God gives us in our lives today. Before you can experience the sign of God's peace, he first makes you face the sign of trouble and misery. As Psalm 30 says, "His anger lasts for only a moment, but His favor lasts for a lifetime. Weeping may last for a night, but there is joyful shouting in the morning."

God may take away that temptation, but not before he teaches you to resist it and rely only on Christ. God might heal your disease and prolong your life, but not before teaching you to face the grave with courage. God might silence those who are insulting you, but not before teaching you boldness to stand

up for the truth. God will most certainly raise you up on the last day, giving eternal life to all who trust in his Son, but not before leading us through the wilderness of this dying world.

Our Lord's signs always reinforce the power of his Word. After traveling around the land of Israel, Jesus again returned to Cana of Galilee where he had performed his first miracle. There was an officer from Capernaum who no doubt had heard of the great sign at the wedding feast. He came to Jesus and asked him to come down and heal his son who was dying. If Jesus can turn water into wine, then certainly he has the power to heal a sick boy. But before the officer could see the sign of his son's health, he first needed to see another sign. It certainly wasn't the sign he was looking for, but the Lord knew he needed it. Expecting to see a kind healer eager to help his son, instead he came across a stern judge who declared, "If you don't see wonderful proofs and miracles, you won't believe."

This is how God operates with his signs. They are not magic tricks meant to wow and impress us. Instead, our Lord exposes the sin and unbelief festering in our natural hearts. He exposes the death plaguing this world. He uncovers the fact that our human reason and strength don't have the ability to believe in God's goodness. If God is good, then why did he let my son die? If God is merciful, then why did he let my marriage fall apart? Why did he allow my parents to abuse me, kids to pick on me, or my friends to forsake me? And if Christ is so kind and gentle, then why does he rebuke this poor father who only wants his son to get well? God exposes the fact that we can't handle the truth about our sin, guilt, and death. We can't handle the cross. It remains a stumbling block to us. As we have talked about so many times, our sinful flesh is incapable of believing.

But God doesn't expose our unbelief so that we would despair. Instead, he is teaching us where our faith comes from. Faith comes only from his Word. It doesn't come from our own planning. It doesn't come from our preconceived notions about how we think God should act. It doesn't come from our willpower or ability to make tough decisions. It doesn't come from our own leap of faith, whatever that might look like. No, faith only comes from hearing the Word of our Savior. So before that officer could see a sign of God's goodness, Jesus first gave him the source of his faith. He said, "Go, your boy lives."

Faith clings to these words of Jesus and nothing else: He lives. Your boy lives. The words are true regardless of what that worried father feels or speculates in that moment. They are true and pure words, flowing from the mouth of the living God. This is the purpose of God's signs. They point to and reinforce the living words of Christ. After all, it is only by these words that we can ever have faith. The officer believed what Jesus told him and then went home.

Consider the other signs our Lord gives us today. He gives us the sign of baptism, which is his Word joined to the washing of water. By these words in the water, he gives us new birth and new life, joining us to his very death and resurrection. He also gives us his body and blood to eat and to drink in the perishable elements of bread and wine. How do we know the bread is his body? Because Jesus said so. How do we know the wine is his blood? Because Jesus said so. How do we know that eating and drinking it will help us? Because Jesus said that it is given and shed for us for the remission of our sins. Our Lord's own cross, his own blood, his own bitter suffering and death is the sign and token of God's favor toward us. His resurrection proves it. He has taken upon himself our sin, our guilt, and our death, and his living, resurrected voice still rings out through the words of his gospel: Christ lives. You therefore live. This promise is for you and for your children.

This teaches us how we should approach all the signs our Lord gives us. We approach them by relying on his Word. God has performed amazing signs, which defy nature. Besides creating the whole universe in six days, he has also flooded the entire world, saving Noah and his family. He has parted the Red Sea, saving his people Israel. He has raised the dead, healed the sick, caused fire to come down from heaven, become a man, suffered, died, and rose again. All of these signs serve to put to shame our own human wisdom, which is incapable of believing in his goodness and mercy. It's therefore quite appropriate that the signs he gives us today do just that.

You can't get any greater assurance that you are God's child than to have the very anointing of his Holy Spirit, the sharing of his Son's death and resurrection, and being clothed with Christ himself. This is exactly what God gives you in baptism. Yet, it remains nothing but a little water bath to our natural reason. You can only see it for what it is by believing his Words. Also, you can't ask for any greater token or pledge of God's favor and peace toward you than to have the very body and blood, by which Jesus won forgiveness, life, and salvation, placed into your very mouth. Honestly, we should be asking for this precious meal every time we gather together! Yet, to our human reason, it remains at best merely a sentimental act of table fellowship and at worst a foolish and offensive make-believe display of cannibalism. You can only recognize it for what it is if you believe the words and testament of Christ.

Consider another sign. God calls a sinful man to declare to you the forgiveness of your sins. You know that this man has nothing in his own character that can announce such a thing to you. You may know some of his faults and quirks. He might even annoy you at times. Yet God has placed in his mouth the words of eternal life for you to hear from Christ Jesus himself.

God chooses the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise. Human eyes see a dead man hanging on a cross, but the living Word reveals that he is God in the flesh, that he bore the wrath of God against our sins, fulfilled the law, and declares us righteous by his blood. His resurrection proves it. He therefore reinforces it for us as we look to the resurrection of our bodies and the life of the world to come.

When that officer was on his way home, he heard that his boy was alive. He found out that he got well at the same time when Jesus said, "Your boy lives." This reinforced his faith. He and everyone at his house believed. It's not that he didn't believe before he figured this out. But now it is reinforced. This is what Christ's resurrection has done for us, and our hope for the resurrection of our bodies does the same thing. Our hope doesn't put us to shame. Waiting for and expecting that Christ will raise us from the grave to live with him forever – this reinforces our faith in his Word. We are baptized into his resurrection, caused to be born again to a living hope, which is kept in heaven for us. And as often as we eat his body and drink his blood, we declare his death with the sure hope that he is coming soon.

All of this prepares us to bear our crosses and patiently pass through our trials and afflictions. They are signs given by God to point us to our Savior's promise that he will give us rest. When he lifts these burdens from us, he reinforces that assurance of his Word. And even when he doesn't take away our afflictions, he assures us that his strength was made perfect in weakness. So whether we are receiving his sacraments or bearing the afflictions he places upon us, the signs our Lord gives always reinforce his words and promises. Hold on, then, to what he says. It remains true long before you actually see it. Amen.