

July 25, 2021
John 6:1-21

Pentecost 9
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“Signs of Grace”

“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’”

One of the greatest moments for a teenager is when they receive their first driver’s license. In New Jersey, we were eligible to receive our first license when we turned seventeen; but unlike a fishing license, you couldn’t simply go to city hall and pay for one. A New Jersey driver’s license required both a written and road test, and thankfully my high school offered drivers’ education classes for all Grade 11 students. After completing the written portion of the test, we had our first experience behind the wheel of a car, beginning on local streets and eventually graduating to an unfinished portion of a freeway that was being built not far from the high school. It gave us great experience driving on a highway, learning how to use our mirrors to make lane changes and driving at high speeds. But one thing that we noticed about this portion of the unfinished interstate was that it was lacking in road signs: no signs indicating speed limits, or upcoming exits, or warning of hazards down the road. Since we had learned about the importance of road signs in the classroom, it seemed strange to drive a stretch of road that had yet to have such signs installed.

Understanding and obeying road signs has been an important part of my life as a driver long after I passed my road test and received my first license; and signs play an important role in many other areas of life beyond roads and highways. Signs offer us guidance in navigating unfamiliar places; they point us to the entrance door, can warn us of dangers, or offer information that is critical in that day’s task, or how many miles or kilometers away we are from our destination. During the pandemic, signs have offered information on how we might stay safe from the virus, or if we are required to wear a mask before entering a building, or what questions need to be answered before we are granted admittance. There are a wide variety of signs, but what all signs have in common is that signs do not exist for their own sake but always point beyond themselves to a situation or hazard of which we need to be aware.

One of the many unique aspects of the Gospel According to John is this Evangelist’s frequent use of “sign” (*semeion*) to describe the importance of Jesus’ miracles. “Signs” in the Fourth Gospel point to Jesus’ revelation of the Father and the Father’s confession of Jesus as the Son. As such they are the basis for faith in God. An encounter with the person of Jesus in the sign leads to seeing and knowing, such as

in the miracle at Cana where “*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*” (2:11). Faith arises when it sees the glory of God in the sign (“*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth*” – 1:14).

The second major section of the Fourth Gospel, like the first, begins with a miracle in Galilee. As at Cana Jesus provided an overabundance of wine (2:1-11), in today’s Gospel lesson Jesus provides an overabundance for the hungry crowds. “*The two narratives thus begin with miracles that show the grace and glory of God.*” (Gail O’Day). The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only miracle story that occurs in all four Gospels (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, and Luke 9:10-17). John’s account of this feeding miracle occurs after Jesus’ lengthy response to those who criticized him for healing a person on the Sabbath (5:1-47). It is after this encounter that “*Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias*” (6:1). This is the only place in Scripture where this important body of water is referred to as the “Sea of Tiberias,” a reminder of earthly rulers and their kingdoms. John reports that “*a large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick*” (6:2); the miracles serve as “signs” pointing beyond themselves to the one who performed the miracle; “*our narrator views Jesus’ miracles as signposts leading to God’s glory*” (Robert Hoch).

As Jesus goes up a mountain and sits down with his disciples as “*the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near*” (6:5), he sees the large crowd approaching and asks Philip, “*where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?*” (6:5). Unlike other accounts where the disciples take the initiative in addressing the hunger of the crowds (“*When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.’*” – Mark 6:35-36), the miracle in John is initiated by Jesus, who also initiated contact with the Samaritan woman (4:9) and the healing of the man by the pool (5:6). The Evangelist indicates that his question is intended “*to test [Philip], for he himself knew what he was going to do*” (6:6). Jesus knows the answer to the question, and he wants to discover whether Philip does. In John, if one knows the source of Jesus’ gifts, one comes close to recognizing Jesus’ identity (“*Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’*” – 4:10). Neither Philip nor Andrew can answer Jesus’ question; instead, they interpret the question on a conventional level and give conventional answers:

- “Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ One of the disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’” – 6:7-9.

But “*conventional expectations offer no solutions to the crowds’ needs; Jesus alone knows how to meet these needs.*” (O’Day). Jesus instructs the disciples to have the crowd sit down (the “five thousand” are the number of households, so the number of persons present was far more than this number indicates). Jesus’ actions reflect the actions of a host at a Jewish meal: “*Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted*” (6:11). Jesus distributes the bread and fish himself, in contrast with the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels where the disciples distribute the food (“*And taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd*” – Luke 9:16). “*Jesus’ distribution of the food enhances the Christological focus of the miracle: the gift of food comes from Jesus himself*” (O’Day). Another unique aspect of John’s account is that he identifies the bread as “barley loaves,” which was bread commonly available to the poor. It may also recall the story of Ruth, who returns with Naomi during the barley harvest (“*They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest*” – Ruth 1:22). In rabbinic interpretations, Boaz’s gift to Ruth anticipates the messianic banquet for the poor, of which Mary sings in the *Magnificat*: “*he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty*” (Luke 1:53). “*John’s high Christology does not diminish the realism of real food meant for real hunger*” (Hoch).

John’s account of this feeding of the multitude also includes a connection to the story of God’s gift of manna in the wilderness: “*When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.*” (6:12-13). The gift of manna was a sign for the people of Israel of God’s continuing presence and care for the people who God had liberated from slavery in Egypt, and in response they needed to trust that God would provide for them daily rather than hoarding the leftover bread to serve themselves:

- “And Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it over until morning.’ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by

morning they gathered it, as much as they needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.” – Exodus 16:19-21.

Jesus continues this teaching when he includes a petition in the Lord’s Prayer in which we pray that God will “*give us this day our daily bread,*” in which we recognize that “*In fact, God gives daily bread without our prayers, even to all evil people, but we ask in this prayer that God cause us to recognize what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving*” (*Small Catechism*).

The scene ends with an account of the people’s response to what they have experienced: “*When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world’*” (6:14). The people’s confession is ambiguous, because while it is an appropriate confession (“*The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet’*” – 4:19), it rests on the evidence of signs. The people’s confession continues the exodus imagery of the miracle because it recalls the promise of a “*prophet like Moses*” (“*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet*” – Deuteronomy 18:15). But they appear to misunderstand what it means to have such a prophet in their midst; Jesus displays his omniscience by knowing in advance the crowd’s intent (as after his cleansing of the Temple, when “*Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone*” (2:24-25). When Jesus “*realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself*” (6:15). The people’s desire to make Jesus king confirms that the people’s response cannot be trusted. Jesus will be king according to *his* definition of kingship, not forced to fit the world’s definition (“*My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over ... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.*” – 18:36). God promised the arrival of a Messiah who would satisfy the people’s need for food and justice (“*I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth and I will fill it.*” – Psalm 81:10), even as God inaugurated a new exodus into the freedom of God’s rule: “*Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones*” (Isaiah 49:13). So when the people move to make Jesus a king rather than worship him as Lord, he slips away.

- “To make Jesus a king is to take his grace and twist it to conform to pre-existent systems of power and authority. To make Jesus king is to judge him

according to human glory rather than to see in him God's glory. When Jesus withdrew from the crowd, he showed that he would offer his gift of grace without claiming worldly power. Jesus' gift of grace thus becomes the vehicle for the revelation of his glory." – O'Day.

As Jesus withdraws to the mountain by himself, the disciples depart by sea: "*When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum*" (6:16-17). As often happened on the waters, "*the lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing*" (6:18); but unlike other experiences with storms on the Sea of Galilee, "*when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified*" (6:19). This story also follows the feeding miracle in Matthew and Mark; but unlike those accounts, the Fourth Gospel does not narrate the stilling of the storm ("*Then he got into the boat and the wind ceased.*" – Mark 6:51), because in John it is not a nature miracle but a miracle of *theophany*, of the revelation of God in Jesus. Jesus' words to the disciples are the key to understanding the miracle: "*It is I; do not be afraid*" (6:20). As Jesus walks across the water, he identifies himself to his disciples with the divine name, "I AM (YHWH), the name that God reveals to Moses on Mount Sinai:

- "But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" – Exodus 3:13-14.

Jesus will identify himself throughout the Fourth Gospel by the continuing use of this means of self-identification, "I AM" (*ego eimi*): "*I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me.*" (14:6). Jesus' self-identification is followed by his command "*do not be afraid*"; these are the words of the salvation oracle, words of comfort spoken to end the distress of God's people ("*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*" – Isaiah 43:1). "Do not be afraid" is also a standard element of theophanies, as when the women come into the presence of the angel at the empty tomb on Easter morning: "*But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.'*" (Matthew 28:5-6). God's dominion over the waters of chaos is a symbol in the Old Testament of God's sovereignty and care ("*When you pass through the*

waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you” – Isaiah 43:2). Jesus’ calming of the storm is a sign that he shares in God’s work and identity, that “the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished” (5:20).

- “Jesus reveals himself to his disciples as one with God, sharing in God’s actions, identifying himself with God’s name, [and] speaking God’s words. Yet this manifestation of the divine in Jesus is not bravura, not a moment of glory for the sake of glory, but a moment of glory for the sake of grace. Jesus reveals himself to his disciples in order to allay their fears, to ensure their safe passage, to remind them that God has been, is, and will be their rescue. Jesus’ glory is not revealed for power, but for grace-filled pastoral care.” – O’Day.

Signs play an important role on our roads and in so many areas of our lives. But signs do not exist for their own sake, nor is our focus strictly on the sign itself. A sign exists to point beyond itself to a reality that will help guide us, warn us of danger, and enhance our lives. Jesus’ manifestations of divine power in feeding multitudes, calming storms, curing lepers, and raising people from the dead do not exist merely for themselves, but for the sake of pointing to the one who is the one who is “*Emmanuel – God with us.*” The signs point to the presence of Jesus Christ – “*fully God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also fully human, born of the virgin Mary*” – who is with us always, whose steadfast love never ceases, from whom not even death can separate us from “*the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:39). They are signs that proclaim the good news that “*the name of Jesus charms our fears and bids our sorrows cease, sings music in the sinner’s ears, brings life and health and peace*” (ELW Hymn 886). As we learned that the signs along the highways of New Jersey helped guide us along our journeys, the signs that assure us of the loving presence of Jesus Christ in our lives assures us that “*when the tempest rages, I need not fear; for you, the Rock of Ages, are always near ... so take my hand and lead me unto the end*” (ELW Hymn 767). Our lives are guided by the signs of grace that point us to the one who is with us always, even to the end of the age.

Amen.