



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Full of Light

Luke 11:29-36

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When we were last in Luke's Gospel two weeks ago we saw Jesus confronted by a crowd. He had just cast a demon out of a man who was mute. St. Luke says that the people "marvelled", but not all of them marvelled in a positive way. They couldn't accept what Jesus was doing at face value. In his teaching Jesus was confronting everything in which they had invested. They wanted a Messiah, but not *this* kind of Messiah. They wanted a Messiah who would confirm them in their thinking and their value systems, but Jesus was challenging everything. And yet they couldn't ignore him. He was *doing* things that validated his message: healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons. His message was that sin and death were the real enemies of the people—not the Romans and not the Herodians—and the things he did showed his power over sin and death. And so some of his detractors decided to cast doubt on Jesus. Sure, he might really be from God and might really be there to defeat sin and death. But if the devil wanted to lead the people astray, he just might be willing to put on a show of bossing around his own forces and maybe even sacrificing a few. And so some from the crowd accused Jesus: He was in cahoots with the devil. He could only cast out demons because he was a demon himself. We saw how Jesus dealt with that accusation last time. He showed the people just how illogical that accusation was.

But there were others in the crowd who questioned Jesus in another way. In 11:16 Luke tells us that others wanted to test Jesus and so they demanded he produce signs from heaven. "Prove you're not in cahoots with the devil. If you're from heaven, Jesus, do something heavenly!" As if casting out the demon hadn't been enough. In our

passage today Jesus now addresses these people. Look at Luke 11:29-30.

**When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation."**

Think on how these words serve as a solemn warning. Jesus isn't speaking directly to us here. He was speaking to the crowd. In fact, he addressed them as "this generation". But there's an indirect warning here to us and to *our* generation. I expect that every one of us at some point has asked God for a sign. Should I do this or should I do that? Should I or shouldn't I? Is it really you, God, or am I just imagining things or thinking wishfully? Give me a sign! Brothers and sisters, sign-seeking is a profoundly pagan way of thinking. When we ask for a sign, what we're doing is trying to paint God into a corner—trying to force him to meet our demands. When we look at the Old Testament we see that the people who demand signs from God were either pagans or men barely removed from paganism. The fact that God sometimes condescends to meet us in our immaturity shouldn't be taken as reason to stay immature in our faith or to make immature demands of him.

Consider that God has spoken. God has made himself known in giving us the Scriptures. He spoke to the prophets and apostles and they've left a witness to that Word in the Bible. If we want to know God, if we want to understand him, if we want to know what his plans are and what his expectations for us are all we have to do is to study his word—to immerse and to steep ourselves in it. The Jews had that Word too. The amazing thing we see about God's graciousness and his willingness to meet us where we are is that despite having given his Word to Israel to prepare them for Jesus, he still gave them signs. They had his Word, but they were still off course and so Jesus came not only preaching, but backing up his message with signs—left and right. They were signs that validated not only the fact that

he was legitimately God's agent, that he was the Messiah, but the nature of Jesus' miracles dovetailed perfectly with the nature of his message. He came preaching release and restoration and forgiveness and his miracles involved release, restoration, and forgiveness. He came to defeat sin and death on a cosmic scale, but he performed miracles in small scale that showed his power over sin and death.

That should have been enough, but it wasn't. The people continued to demand signs and that, combined with all the other ways in which he had been rejected, prompted him to declare to them: you're an evil generation! Think of that the next time you're tempted to ask God for a sign when he's already given us his Word and when he's already sent his Son to manifest the breaking in of his kingdom. "You're an evil generation because you demand a sign!" They should have known better. Demanding signs to get answers from God is the way pagans operate. The Jews should have known that, but they demanded a sign anyway. Knowing the Scriptures, they should have recognised Jesus based on his message alone. And when they didn't Jesus *did* perform signs—not in response to their demands, but on his own initiative. And still they rejected him. They had every reason to believe, but they refused.

Have you ever run into someone who believes something foolish and who won't change his or her mind no matter how much evidence you present? The other day I was reading an article about the contrail conspiracy theory. Contrails are the white trails of condensation left behind by jets as they travel through the atmosphere, but there's a frighteningly large group of people out there who believe that those trails are actually chemicals that the government pays the airlines to spray into the atmosphere—chemicals designed to dumb us all down and to make us unquestioning and quiescent. Reading the comment section after the article was disturbing and amusing. Despite all the evidence that that contrails are just condensed water vapour, commenter after commenter irrationally insisted that it's all a conspiracy. If you believe that contrails are just condensation it's

because the government plot is working—you've been dumbed down by the chemicals and now just believe what you're told. No amount of physics or chemistry or even common sense could break through the shell of disbelief. It's a self-perpetuating delusion.

Jesus was dealing with that kind of disbelief. God had given the people everything they needed to put their faith in Jesus, but still they refused believe. The more signs he did, the more they would accuse him of being in league with the devil. And so Jesus gives them a solemn warning. He tells them that the only sign they're going to receive is the sign of Jonah. This isn't the kind of sign they should want, because it's ultimately a sign of judgement. This is Jesus shaking the dust from his shoes.

Jonah was the Old Testament prophet sent to Nineveh to call the people to repentance. He didn't want to go. He would rather the Ninevites simply face God's wrath. And so he got on a ship sailing to the other end of the world. God chased him down with a storm, the sailors threw Jonah overboard, and he was swallowed by a great fish that took him back to land, and spit him up in the direction of Nineveh. Jonah grudgingly went and preached to the city, the Ninevites repented, and God spared them while Jonah sulked over it. Now Jesus puts himself in the role of Jonah and he puts the Jews in the role of the Ninevites. Jesus might have chosen Jonah because of his three days in the fish. Jesus was going to be spending three days in the grave. He might have chosen this specific analogy because as Jonah preached that the Lord was giving Nineveh forty days to repent before he came in judgement, Jesus was preaching to the Jews of his day that they had forty years to repent before he came in judgement. But I suspect that Jesus chose his Jonah-Nineveh analogy mostly because he knew the Jews would *hate* being compared to the pagan, gentile Ninevites. How dare Jesus compare them to unclean gentiles! And yet that really underscores Jesus' point. The Ninevites heard Jonah's call to repentance and despite the fact that they

were unclean, pagan gentiles, they actually *did* repent and God spared them. Like Jonah, Jesus has come preaching repentance and God's own people, the people whom he had called and chosen, the people whom he'd been preparing for two thousand years, the people to whom he'd given his Word, were obstinately rejecting his Messiah. Like contrail conspiracy theorists, they had all the evidence, but they refused to believe. God's Word wasn't good enough; they wanted signs. And then signs weren't good enough: "How do we know your signs aren't demonic? We want signs from heaven!"

As if that's not enough, Jesus condemns these people by comparing to another faithful pagan. Look at verse 31-32:

**The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.**

"The queen of the South" is a reference to the Queen of Sheba. 1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9 describe her visit to King Solomon. He was the greatest of Israel's kings in its golden age. He was rich, he was powerful, and he was wise and this great queen came to visit to see if Solomon was all he was said to be and when she saw that he was, she paid him homage and gave him gifts. Solomon was God's anointed king—an earthly king, but still God's king—and the queen of Sheba, despite being a pagan gentile, had the sense to recognise that he was God's anointed and to honour him. And now Jesus has come on the scene. He's the anointed one to whom all the other anointed ones point and for whom all the others are merely types and shadows. Jesus is the true and real king for whom all the other kings, even the great Solomon, were simply keeping the throne warm. And yet where a pagan, gentile queen could see God's

anointing on a mere man, his chosen people refuse to see an even greater anointing on Jesus the Messiah.

And so Jesus preaches a message of judgement and a message of warning that would, no doubt, have royally cheesed off the crowd: "You call yourselves God's chosen and Abraham's seed, but on the last day when God renders his final judgement on the human race, he will resurrect the queen of Sheba and he will resurrect the Ninevites so that they can stand with him in judgement and by their witness condemn *you!*"

This is one of Jesus' common themes. Status in God's kingdom doesn't come by birth; it comes by faith. Think back to the woman earlier in the chapter. She marvelled at the things Jesus was saying and doing and shouted out that Jesus' mother was blessed to have such a son. Jesus responded: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" "This generation"—the Jews who rejected Jesus was sure of their place in God's kingdom, but on the last day they'd find themselves suddenly on the outside because of their lack of faith. And while they stood their wailing and gnashing their teeth, in would come the gentile Ninevites and the queen of Sheba who repented and believed.

In verses 33-36 Jesus makes the awful diagnosis of the problem. Why do people reject him? Here's why:

**"No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light."**

Jesus begins by telling them that they have no excuse for unbelief. God isn't hiding anything from them. In fact, he's spent two thousand years preparing

them for the coming of Jesus. This is what Jesus means when he says that no one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket or in the cellar. You light a lamp so that everyone can see. That's just what God has done. And it's just what Jesus has been doing. All the signs anyone should need have been and are being done.

God has shined his light brightly. But there's rebuke and condemnation here too. God has put the light where everyone can see it. Consider that Israel was commissioned to be his light to the world, but then Israel covered herself with a basket. She kept the light to herself, not only letting the world go on in darkness, but then convincing herself that the world was the problem, not the darkness. She condemned the world for being in darkness while she kept the very light the world needed to herself.

Consider how often we do the same thing. God has given us the light of Christ. We hold it closely. But then we look into the darkness of the world and we see people living in unbelief and living in sin and sometimes even persecuting those of us who hold the light they need and what do we do? We hold our light more closely. We retreat from the darkness of the world and we hurl condemnation at it: How dare you commit those awful sins! How dare you persecute me! How evil and foolish can you be, embracing the darkness the way you do! When Jesus comes back you'd better watch out! We forget that people in darkness can't see. We forget that we're the ones with the light they need. We're the fools. We're the ones hiding the light from them and then condemning them for stumbling around in the dark. That's what Israel had done.

And now Jesus diagnoses the problem: It's an issue of having "unhealthy" or "evil" eyes. On the one hand, if your eye is good—if it's healthy—your whole body is full of light. On the other hand, however, if your eye is evil—if it's unhealthy—you'll be full of darkness. If this seems a little confusing, remember that ancient people didn't have the benefit of modern

physiology. Their understanding of how our eyes work was different from ours. But the point Jesus is making is that it's about perception. As our response to light is dependent on the proper working of a healthy eye, so our response to God's revelation is dependent on our spiritual sight.

Israel had covered her light for so long that now she had become dark herself. Her eyes had gone bad, but she didn't understand that. Think of Mr. Magoo: blind as a bat, but completely unaware of the fact. Israel had become a spiritual Mr. Magoo. She didn't realize she was blind and, Jesus warns, because of her bad eyes, she was about to blithely walk into disaster. The light was shining brightly, but because she refused to see it, the room might as well have been pitch black. And so as Jesus preached the kingdom, Israel rejected him because she couldn't understand. He performed miracles to back up his kingdom message, but Israel were so blind that she attributed those miracles to demonic power.

The Good News is that there's hope. Israel simply needs to open her eyes and so do we. Jesus' call is to respond to the light and to live by it while there's still time. God sent Jonah to Ninevah to call the people to repentance or in forty days his judgement would come. Jesus came to call Israel to repentance and he repeatedly pointed to judgement that was to come in forty years. Israel's light continued to be darkness; Israel continued to reject his message and refused to repent. In A.D. 70 God came in judgement, using the Romans to destroy Jerusalem and to destroy the temple. It was a not so subtle hint that in Jesus the fulfilment of all his promises to Israel had finally come. The kingdom was no longer about a literal plot of land and no longer about a literal temple. The kingdom was now to be found in Jesus himself and it looks forward to a day when all of Creation is ruled by God and made his temple.

But brothers and sisters, the judgement that came on Israel in A.D. 70 points to a greater judgement that we still await. Like Israel, we need to embrace the light

while we still have a chance. When Israel failed to be the light God had called her to be, he sent Jesus to be the light himself. You and I now live in the light of Christ, but again, how often are we guilty of keeping that light to ourselves the same way Israel did? How often do we hold Jesus closely while we condemn the world around us? How often do we hide our light under a basket as if it somehow needs protection—as if the world could somehow snuff Jesus out? How often do we allow the light in us to turn into darkness? Instead, we need not only to allow the light of Christ to permeate our whole selves and to transform us, we also need to remember that Jesus calls us now to be lights—to go out into the world and to shine so brightly that we drive the darkness away from and out of others.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, you sent your Son into the world to overwhelm the darkness with his light. Thank you for shining his light into our lives and for driving the darkness of sin and death from us. Give us boldness now to be the light you have called us to be. Let us never forget that the world needs the light of Christ and let us carry that light into the darkness for all to see. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.