

We hear today in the gospel, there is something greater here.
There is something greater than a prophet.
There is something greater than the wisest of kings.

My sisters and brothers. Can you feel it? That there is something greater here?

Maybe so... But, maybe not, because if you are like me, well I get stuck. Or sometimes I feel like I am barely hanging on to faith. To be honest, many times I find myself skeptical of God, thinking: *should I really believe in God?*

I mean, what difference does it make?

Or I find myself being controlling: God you *need* to do this to be real in my life. Or this *for sure* is what God can do and this *for sure* is what God cannot do.

Then, if I am really honest, I find myself *looking* for reasons to doubt.

Like, as I heard today's gospel reading, I found myself thinking: Jesus, why do you have to say such harsh things? Saying things like: "*this is an evil generation who seeks a sign.*" I mean come on Jesus, a little heavy handed. Why aren't you saying things that are easier on the ears? Should I really follow you?

And on and on it goes.

But, you know, I am a scripture teacher and I always try to teach my students to stick with uncomfortable texts. So on my good days, when I notice myself skeptical, controlling and doubting, I have this little internal alarm that goes off telling me: okay, Don't give into these feelings so quickly. Dig around and see what Jesus is up to. Push yourself. Take Jesus' words more seriously and ask: *is there something greater here?*

So a little bit of context for the gospel passage we heard today. If we zoomed out, then we would come to know that Jesus is "on the road". He has left the region of his hometown and he is on journeying

towards Jerusalem. And as he travels, he visits towns where he preaches and enacts this new reality, this new experience of life called: “the kingdom of God”. And some pretty radical stuff begins happening: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the hungry are fed, people are set free from their burdens.

And in the passage, right before our gospel reading, he has just brought about a “kingdom of God” moment: *a mute can finally speak*. In an act of compassion, Jesus casts out a demon that was making a person mute; Restoring to them a precious gift that we might seriously take for granted: **speech**. So this person who has been weighed down by darkness in their life, burdened to the point where they can’t even speak their pain, can’t speak about their suffering, is now gifted with the ability to give voice to what has been haunting them. And when I imagine this passage, I imagine Jesus leaning in; eager to listen to this person.

This healing though does not take place in isolation. There is a crowd surrounding the two of them. Initially they are *astonished*. The text says: “they were amazed.”

But what is really interesting is *immediately* the mood flips. And this thing called *skepticism* creeps in. Doubts are voiced they quickly build. Some of them conclude: he is actually able to perform this healing not because he is filled with compassion, but rather because he is collaborating with *demonic* forces.

Now, you might be thinking, those crazy ancient folks- they are so quick to jump to **such dramatic conclusions**. But, if we are really honest with ourselves, how often is our default to doubt people’s intentions? So much so that even when someone does something good, it becomes easy to keep assuming the worst? How easy it can become to listen to one person who whispers a piece of gossip or skepticism in our ear, and suddenly we and the whole crowd are convinced that the person doing good is actually against us and this whole thing flips within a matter of seconds?

I mean, Jesus just healed someone and almost immediately is interpreted as an enemy.

You know, he is probably actually with the other party, or on the other team, or he is using heretical methods to make this happen.

And what is the underlying message of this skepticism?: Don't trust him. And right after the skepticism is voiced, there is a second voice from the crowd testing Jesus, saying: prove yourself! Give us a sign from heaven!

By this time, the "amazement" is totally gone and now Jesus is on trial. It is as if the dark spirit that bound the mute had immediately grafted itself onto the crowd. So, rather than see the kingdom of God has just appeared in their midst, that the mute can now speak; rather than throw a party, they assume the worst. They move from *awe* to complete *deconstruction* of Jesus' action. They tear his miracle apart. And, they want a sign. They want Jesus on their own terms.

After recognizing this context for the passage we heard today in the gospel, I think of Jesus *reasonably* launching into a rebuttal and *reasonably* making a judgment. I picture him doing it not just to defend himself, but in defense of the one who can now speak. I picture him torn up inside because the crowd has *soured the opportunity to rejoice* with one who is no longer under the weight of suffering silently; that person is forgotten because they are onto "project ridicule" and onto "project prove yourself".

It's important for us to reflect: Are we discerning with our criticism? With our skepticism? Or are we quick to make criticism our default way of seeing the world? So much that we sour moments when we should rejoice? Choose ridicule when the proper response should be joy?

And so, the gospel passage we hear today is the end of Jesus' rebuttal. He is waking us to the destruction we can cause when we

give into this impulse. His piercing words help us see *again* what skepticism and control *do not allow us to see*.

Jesus says, “This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, *except* the sign of Jonah.”

This might at first appear as a curious response. However, the crowds would have been familiar with the story of the complex prophet Jonah and would have had alarm bells going off....

You see, Jonah was a Hebrew prophet in the Old Testament (they guy who appeared in our first reading) and he was tasked with preaching to the Ninevites to repent or else destruction would come to their city. And the Ninevites were not just any old neighbor of the Israelites, they were an enemy nation, oppressive neighbors. Jonah and his tribe would have thought *obviously* they were not deserving of God’s mercy. So, after trying to run from God (foolish, because God is God and intervenes) Jonah gives the people of Nineveh a warning. However, it is a pretty pathetic warning. He barely walks through a ginormous city, and gives the shortest sermon in all of scripture: “forty days more and the city will be destroyed”. And, miraculously his lousy, half hearted sermon was strong enough to convert the hearts of *all* the Ninevites from the animals to the King. And God, in an act of extreme mercy, spares the Ninevites from destruction. The prophet, even this incredibly pathetic prophet, was the **sign** that saves a people gone astray.

Note: in this case a “sign” is not something that proves God’s legitimacy or power.

No, in this story a “**sign**” is for the people. The sign wakes them up to the destruction they are causing.

So, back to the exchange in the gospel. You are in the crowd and might begin to think: *shoot, sign of Jonah??* Jesus has changed the meaning of “sign” on us. He says we will not get a sign from heaven, only a sign that makes us reflect on our own actions...

Jesus says the *Son of Man* will be like Jonah, a **sign** that leads a people who have been in darkness towards repentance and new life. And then he goes on to say that if the people miss the sign, the Nivevites will judge them.

Essentially they will ask: how did you miss it?! We had a lousy prophet who saved us from ourselves. They might even plea-- Don't you see? There is *something much greater* here. They might say: you have the *source of Mercy* right in front of you. You have the *source* of compassion and justice. Don't miss it.

Because who is the *Son of Man*? Who is this sign to us? It is Jesus the Christ. He is our sign that draws us out of darkness and into new life. He is the one with the compassionate touch that frees us from suffering silently. He is mercy right in front of us. And wherever two or more of us gather, Christ is in our midst. Right now, he is here, with us. Christ's power of healing and mercy-- it is here. It abounds. It moves through us.

My sisters and brothers, as we journey together through these nine days of prayer, Jesus wants to offer us *healing*. Jesus wants us to be able to speak our truth; our suffering. He wants us to be *seen* and *unburdened*.

We are the mute who Jesus wants to unbound.
We are the crowd who Jesus is pleading to let go of our skepticism.
Let go of our need to control and have things on your own terms.

Jesus is telling us: the Son of Man is *here*. Turn towards me and be set free. Yes- there is something greater here.