

## SERMON NOTES

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Synaxis Gospel  
Matthew 12:38-45

### THE SIGN OF THE RESURRECTION

#### INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted among Bible scholars that the events and teachings recorded in Matthew 4:12-18:35 took place during the ministry of Jesus in Galilee.<sup>1</sup> He made His headquarters in a village by the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum. From there, Jesus and His disciples traveled to the cities in the region and nearby Galilee.<sup>2</sup>

Our reading is taken from an event placed by Matthew after a series of encounters with the Pharisees who were antagonistic to Jesus. They did not accept Him as the Messiah/Christ promised by God and they were actively planning to kill Him.<sup>3</sup> However, to succeed, it was necessary for them to discredit Him with the masses, which were amazed by His teachings and miracles.<sup>4</sup>

After Jesus had cast out a demon,<sup>5</sup> the Pharisees had countered the excited enthusiasm of the crowds by claiming that Jesus had healed the demon-possessed man by the power of the prince of demons, Beelzebub.<sup>6</sup> Jesus responded by showing the fallacy of their argument.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, He warned them of the danger of attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to that of a demon.<sup>8</sup> With that, the Pharisees drew back to regroup. Now, once again, some of them with their scribes—experts in the Law—approach Him again.

#### SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 12:38-45

*Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."*

*But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no*

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (London: Robert Scott Roxburghe House, 1909) p.45.

<sup>2</sup> Chronology is not important to the Synoptic writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke. They share much of the same material, but each writer arranges the events in an order that suits his own theological emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 12:14

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 12:23

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 12:22

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 12:24

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 12:25-29

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 12:31-32

*sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet;*

*for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

*“The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*

*“The Queen of the South shall rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*

*“Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it.*

*“Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order.*

*“Then it goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.*

*That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.”*

## NOTES

**Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.”**

*Teacher* was a term of respect. Here, the scribes and Pharisees used it to re-approach Jesus with a measure of civility.

The scribes were persons who had passed a rigorous examination, and were considered able and expert lawyers.

What kind of sign? The group was not requesting a healing or an exorcism, miracles that they had already rejected as slight of hand tricks or demon-powered works.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the scribes felt they had a right to test Jesus with a different kind of sign, for Moses had written:

*“When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”<sup>10</sup>*

Perhaps they were asking for some prophesy that, when it came to pass, would authenticate Jesus as the Messiah/Christ. If He failed, they would then have the right to kill Him as a false prophet under the Law.<sup>11</sup>

### **But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet;**

“An evil and an adulterous generation” referred to their disloyalty to God, whose covenant with Israel was like a marriage contract. Since marriage was a metaphor for the relationship between God and His people, disloyalty could be spoken of as *adultery*, and often in the Prophets, it was so termed.<sup>12</sup>

A generation who had deserted God craved supernatural phenomena, because their lives were empty of real spirituality.

The prophet Jonah is first mentioned in the record of the kings of Israel who reigned in Samaria.<sup>13</sup> The Old Testament book of Jonah recounts his mission to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians. The Assyrians were a violent and extremely cruel people, who had terrorized that part of the world.

Jonah had rebelled against his assignment from the Lord, because he did not want the people of Nineveh to have even a chance of salvation from the wrath of God.<sup>14</sup> Fleeing in the opposite direction by boat, Jonah was swallowed by a huge sea creature, after the sailors reluctantly flung him overboard. This action saved their ship from a violent storm sent by God. For three days and nights Jonah survived in the stomach of the creature. There he repented, and God gave him a second chance to obey His command. The creature vomited Jonah on to dry land, after which the prophet fulfilled his mission.

The experience of Jonah is called a sign by our Lord. Somehow, the truth of the prophet’s words was testified to by his experience in, and release alive from, the belly of the sea creature. The account in Jonah does not relate why, but only that the people of Nineveh immediately repented, and turned to God, after Jonah preached to them of coming destruction.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 12:22-24

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 18:22

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 18:20

<sup>12</sup> The Book of Hosea has this metaphor as its theme. Cf. Deuteronomy 31:16 and other passages where unfaithfulness is likened to *harlotry*.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Kings 14:25

<sup>14</sup> Jonah 4:2

<sup>15</sup> Jonah 3

**for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**

In Jewish reckoning, a 'day' began the previous evening at dusk. They reckon any part of a day as *a day*. Jesus was buried before dusk the day He was crucified. That would have been considered a day (evening and morning). He then lay one full day (evening and morning) in the tomb, and was resurrected in the morning of the third day, which they again would reckon as a day (evening and morning). Thus, they would say, He was three days and three nights in the tomb.<sup>16</sup>

The Resurrection from the grave (the heart of the earth) testified to the truth of Jesus Christ. Everything that He said, about God and Himself, is absolutely true. This would be the only sign given to the scribes and Pharisees who had forsaken their covenant with God. The sign would not give them a cause to put Him to death; they will have already done that. The sign will reveal their sin, not His.

**The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, something greater than Jonah is here.**

At the last judgment, the people of Nineveh will accuse the people of Jesus' day, because with much less evidence from Jonah, they had turned to God. They had only had the prophet of God, who they accepted; the scribes and Pharisees had God Incarnate in their midst, and they rejected Him.

**The Queen of the South shall rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.**

The Queen of Sheba (Ethiopia), or here called the Queen of the South, had heard of the wisdom of Solomon.<sup>17</sup> She had traveled over a thousand miles just to listen to Solomon, a tremendous effort on her part. But as wise as Solomon was, he could not compare to the One in Whom all wisdom resides. She will accuse the scribes and Pharisees in the last judgment, because she only had Solomon to learn from, while they had the divine King, the Son of God, and they refused to hear Him.

**Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it.**

Jesus is making a generalization. We are not told how a man is freed of the unclean spirit or demon, but only that, once it leaves, it cannot find another place to rest. Some think that 'waterless places' refers to the desert.<sup>18</sup> Evidently, on this earth at least, demons need some sort of body to inhabit. Once, when Christ commanded a legion of demons to leave a man, they begged to be allowed to enter the bodies of a herd of pigs.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For an explanation of the seeming discrepancy between the traditional view that Christ was crucified on Friday, and thus, for a full three days and three nights did not lie in the tomb see R. C. H. Linski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943) p. 493.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Kings 10:1-13

<sup>18</sup> Plummer, p. 185

<sup>19</sup> Luke 8:32

**Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order.**

The demon returns to the man he formerly possessed and finds him spiritually empty but cleaned up from the past effects of the demon. Whatever the demon had impaired was now fully working again.

**Then it goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.**

Jesus does not say why the demon gets seven others to join it, but the neat state of the *house* seems to influence its action. Or, possibly, it feels that it needs the strength of the group to withstand future exorcism.

The power for evil of eight demons is much more, and their effect is much worse, than that of only one demon.

**That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.”**

The generation of Jesus’ day was as spiritually empty as the man of the parable. Instead of seeking a living relationship with God to fill them, they feigned it with hypocrisy. They looked good, all swept and in order, but they were empty. But even that state was not to endure, evil would soon fill them up, and they would turn viciously upon the One Who loved them, and came to save them.

## APPLICATION

Two thousand years ago, the day set aside for gathering to worship God was not Sunday, but Saturday, the seventh day of the week called the Sabbath. To honor and celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord, we now meet together on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day Christ rose from the dead.

The Resurrection is important to us, because it proved that everything that Jesus said was true. It proved His identity, that He is God, and became a man for our sakes. It proved that He accomplished our salvation by His death on the Cross. It proves that the debt for all our sins has been completely paid, and we can now be freely forgiven. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most important sign God has ever given to mankind.

In our reading, Matthew tells us that the Jewish lawyers, experts in the Law of God, asked Jesus to give them a sign, a proof that He spoke the truth, and that He indeed was sent by God. Although they addressed Him as “Teacher,” their politeness did not cover their hatred for Him. Just earlier, members of their group had accused Jesus of being in league with Satan, and that His miracles were done with the power of the evil one. They did not believe Jesus could produce a sign of a true prophet of God.

Moses had written in the Law that a true prophet could be distinguished from a false one by his prophecy. If what the prophet said would happen did happen, the prophet was true. If it did not happen, the prophet was false, and should be killed. The lawyers were looking for a legal excuse to kill Jesus. Would Jesus give them a sign of His authenticity? Jesus knew their evil hearts, but He gave them their sign: the Resurrection. He prophesied that, just as the prophet Jonah had been three days and three nights in the belly of the sea creature, so would Jesus be in the grave. Everybody knew the story of the prophet Jonah,

and that after the time in the belly of the sea monster, he had been vomited out to continue his mission for God. As Jonah came out of the sea creature in three days, even so, would Jesus come out of the grave in three days. Death could not hold Jesus.

The enemies of Jesus understood what Jesus prophesied, and they did not forget it.<sup>20</sup> After the crucifixion, they had a guard placed in front of the tomb, where Jesus had been buried, to watch and make sure that the disciples did not take the body away, and claim the prophesy had been fulfilled.<sup>21</sup> The lawyers did not realize that the prophecy had gone right over the heads of the disciples; it did not sink into their minds. Therefore, although Jesus had told them many times, the disciples did not expect Jesus to be crucified, much less, to rise from the dead.

Jesus did rise from the dead, exactly as He had foretold. The lawyers had their sign. And what did it prove? It proved that they had been wrong: wrong in their hatred, wrong in their unbelief, wrong in their desire to kill Him. It proved their sin. Moreover, in the Law God stated that “whoever will not listen to My words which he [the true prophet in question] shall speak in My Name; I Myself will require it of him.”<sup>22</sup> The Apostle Peter explained what God meant: the disobedient person, the person who would not listen to the One sent by God, would be “utterly destroyed from among the people.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the lawyers who persistently rejected the Lord, and who sought to condemn Jesus, were themselves condemned.

That generation of Jews had been more blessed with opportunity than any generation before, or after them. Jesus Christ, God in human form, had walked among them. Still, most of them, in the end, rejected Him. Jesus had once told them that signs do not turn people to God. If they will not believe the Holy Scriptures, they will not believe, even if one should rise from the dead.<sup>24</sup> Those, who posted the guard at Jesus’ tomb, were told by the soldiers what they had seen, but still, the Jewish religious leaders refused to accept it. They continued on in their unbelief and persecuted the disciples.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ has a meaning for unbelievers: condemnation. But for those who love and follow our Lord, it is a message of joy. For the unbelievers who reject Christ, the Resurrection proves that they have rejected the Truth, and will be judged by Almighty God. But for those who have accepted Him, it proves what they already know, that their sins have been dealt with on the Cross, and the believers are free of the penalty of sin and death. Moreover, the Resurrection points to the fact that if our bodies die, we still live with Him, and someday, our bodies will also be resurrected.

This, for Christians, is a thing to be greatly celebrated. We have chosen Sunday as a day to do just that. May Sunday, and every day, be a day of remembering, with joy, this greatest of signs—the sign of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior.

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 27:62

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 27:64-66

<sup>22</sup> Deuteronomy 18:19

<sup>23</sup> Acts of the Apostles 3:23

<sup>24</sup> Luke 16:31