

## Sign From the Dead

Luke 16:19-31

One of the most-watched streaming movies last year was the satirical film, *Don't Look Up*. A parody of disaster movies and an allegory about the reaction to climate change, the movie starts with the discovery of a comet that is on a collision course with Earth. Instead of doing anything about it, though, different governments try to ignore it; different corporations try to profit from it. Meanwhile, the comet keeps getting closer and closer until it's impossible to ignore. The government, though, launches a "Don't Look Up" campaign to get people to ignore it, even though it just keeps growing and growing in the sky. Despite the sign that everyone can see, many ignore it until it's too late.

We sometimes think that if there were signs from God, they would be impossible to ignore. If only God would do a miracle, people would be unable to doubt God's existence anymore. Yet throughout the Bible, we see again and again that isn't the case. Even when faced with unimpeachable evidence of God's power, people ignore it. That's true even when we start talking about miraculous occurrences like someone rising from the dead.

While starting our look at the 10 Commandments in confirmation, we looked at when the Israelites received them. God had used Moses to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt into freedom. The people had seen the 10 plagues God used to judge the Egyptians. They'd crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, and seen Pharaoh's army swept away when the waters returned. They'd been led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They'd seen the fire and cloud surrounding the top of Mount Sinai, and heard Moses' words. Yet when Moses remains on Mount Sinai

talking to God, the people grow impatient, make a golden calf idol, and proclaim that it was what had led them out of Egypt. Despite all the signs from God they'd seen, it didn't take them long to disobey.

If God gave us the signs we demanded, we'd soon tire of them. We'd demand greater and greater signs, and never be satisfied. "If God plucked a star from the sky at our behest, or removed a mountain suddenly into the sea, or halted the sun in its orbit, these wonders would soon pall. Then a new and more stupendous miracle would be required to validate those past miracles. Each new doubt would cry out for a greater marvel, until life would be diseased by overwhelming curiosity and victimized by prodigies of sensationalism"

Today our Gospel lesson is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, unique among the parables of Jesus for featuring a named character. But while the story is familiar, I want to focus on the ending. The rich man, nameless in the text but sometimes called Dives from the Latin word for rich man, seems to have a suggestion with merit. Why not send someone back from the dead, an emissary from the other world, to convince people of the realities of life? Wouldn't this be the ultimate testimony?

2000 years later, we are even familiar with that happening, a rich man who cares for no one else is convinced to change his ways and change his life after being visited by ghosts. Charles Dickens begins his famous novel *A Christmas Carol* with the words "Marley was dead, to begin with ... This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate." Without knowing that Jacob Marley, Scrooge's deceased

partner, was dead, his appearance wouldn't mean anything. It wouldn't be unusual. But if he's dead and still appears to Ebenezer Scrooge? That's unusual. That means something out of the ordinary is happening. It makes us, and Scrooge, pay attention to the message. And then he appears weighed down by chains that he says he forged in life. By his greed and pursuit of money above all else, he forged chains of "cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel." His deeds burdened him not just in this life, but after his death. Yet for Scrooge, it took not only the appearance of the ghost of Marley, but the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, as well as Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim to get Scrooge to change his life. Marley's initial appearance wasn't enough on its own.

In a lecture at Concordia Seminary years ago, Dr. Donald Carson pointed out the rich man hadn't changed at all. On earth he regarded Lazarus as a person of no account. Same in hell. Just, "send that no account person to me with some water." Selfish on earth; selfish in hell. Blame others for your problems on earth; blame others in hell. Insist on your way on earth; insist on your way in hell. Don't repent on earth; don't repent in hell.

That's the problem with the rich man's request at the end of our Gospel lesson today. The rich man thinks that if only his brothers could see someone return from the dead, they would repent and not end up in the same place he is, tormented in the flame. But that wouldn't be the case. They had all they needed – Moses and the Prophets, the word of God describing all God had done for his people. A miracle wouldn't change their minds.

As amazing as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is, the last line is quite the zinger. "If

they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31). It takes your breath away and sends chills down your spine. If the words of Moses and the prophets aren't enough to inspire repentance, the miraculous appearance of someone raised from the dead will meet the same stubborn disbelief.

The same thing happened to the prophets. They told of disasters to come if the people continued in their rebellion against God. The people continued in their sin, and were punished. God rescued them, and yet the people soon grew unfaithful again. Signs and miracles from God didn't change their selfishness.

We see that in the account of the other Lazarus mentioned in the Bible, Jesus' friend who dies and is raised from the dead. Instead of seeing this miracle and believing in Jesus, the Pharisees and religious leaders plot to kill Lazarus again. His resurrection isn't proof of God's power for them – it's something that's leading the people astray. Seeing someone come back from the dead wasn't enough to get them to repent and turn back to God. Instead, it merely hardened their resolve.

When Jesus himself is raised from the dead, the same thing happens. While those who already trusted in Jesus believed in the resurrection, it took them some convincing. A Roman centurion cries out, "Surely this was the Son of God!" when Jesus dies on the cross, but none of those on guard duty who see the stone rolled away come to faith – they're too worried about saving their own skins. They agree to lie that the disciples stole Jesus' body. They don't believe that Jesus has risen from the dead, or that their lives need to change.

Thanks be to God that we have that sign, and we believe. We know that Moses and the prophets point to Jesus. We know Jesus died and rose again to defeat death, and came back to show us this was true. That's a sign from God we can trust.

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