

Read also Numbers 22, excerpts. Check out the service, which is recorded on www.fpcd.org.

A very good friend teaches fifth grade Sunday School and has for years. He loves the Old Testament and has become quite an expert in it. But there is one story that drives him crazy, and it is the story about Balaam and the donkey which you heard today. My friend does not believe in talking donkeys, even if it is in the Bible.

Today, however, we talk about signs from God. The Bible is full of signs. Sometimes the signs are believable. *“When this certain thing happens,”* God says, *“you will know I have been with you.”* God said this to Moses at the burning bush. *“This is your sign that I am the one who has sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God at this very mountain”* (Ex 3:12). Another time God said through Isaiah: *“this is a sign to you, the virgin will bear a son and you shall name him Immanuel”* (Isa 7:14). Signs from God are throughout the Bible. They were given to Abraham and Joshua and Esther and Elijah and Paul. Some are very clear. Other signs are not as easy to believe, like the sun standing still for a day or a talking donkey.

So what are we to believe today? Probably a good starting place is to recognize that when you are involved in God’s kingdom, there will be manifestations of God’s presence. There will be signs.

Sometimes those manifestations are extraordinary. Sometimes the signs are simply words in your head. For instance, a woman worried about money. After attending a Bible study she was driving home one day, thinking about her worry. She heard God speak to her – just in her head – nevertheless, it was very clear. God said, “Well, how much money is enough?” She pondered the question, and it did make her relax and feel heard. Then strangely enough, a few months later out of the blue she received an unexpected gift of money. That is a sign.

The Pharisees demanded a sign. The Scripture tells us explicitly they wanted to test Him. This caused Jesus to “sigh deeply in his spirit.” This was not any old sigh; it was a “will-they-ever-learn” sigh. It was an expression of deep pain over their stubborn disobedience. It meant in Jesus’ mind they had turned their back on God. So He refused their sign and gave them nothing. The unbeliever, despite the evidence, will always find grounds for unbelief.

So in spite of all the miracles of healing, opening of blind eyes and deaf ears, and Jesus just feeding two massive crowds of thousands of people, they want proof. Let’s hear the story. READ Mark 8:11-21

The Pharisees and Herod, who killed John the Baptist on a whim, had what Jesus called “a yeast.” They had something that was like a cancer. That’s what yeast does. It grows inside the dough and changes its nature. In the Bible, that was a bad sign; it symbolized something bad that permeated and overwhelmed good.

Now the disciples were like poor Balaam. A sign had occurred right in front of them. Just the week before, they had been passing out bread to thousands of people. They knew they only started with a couple of sandwiches, yet basketsful were left over. Yet in the boat with Jesus, He starts talking about yeast, and they worry that they didn’t bring enough bread.

Jesus must have sighed really deeply. Maybe He wondered, *what will it take?*

Balaam rides a donkey that starts talking to him, saying, "Have I ever treated you this way?" But he couldn't see the sign. *Did he not think this was a sign??!* Not to mention he's sitting there talking to a donkey!

You see, Balaam started out with a simple conversation with God in prayer over whether he should go with the men who wanted him to curse Israel. While praying he heard God tell him not to curse Israel. But perhaps he did not take the prayer seriously. So God went to extraordinary measures to get the message across.

Do you believe that God directs you? Or do you struggle to accept that Jesus can and does speak to you?

The disciples were not incorporating the miraculous power they had experienced into their lives. It was cause for Jesus to lose His patience. He let loose on them:

Why are you arguing about having no bread?

Do you still not know or understand?

Are your hearts too hard to take it in?

You have eyes -- can't you see? You have ears -- can't you hear?

Don't you remember anything at all? (Don't you see the signs?)

Jesus goes on:

When I fed the 5,000 with five loaves of bread, how many baskets of leftovers did you pick up afterward?" "Twelve," they said. "And when I fed the 4,000 with seven loaves, how many large baskets of leftovers did you pick up?" "Seven," they said.

"Don't you understand yet?"

It was a hard day for all of them because they were not "going with" faith.

Jesus lived on an entirely different plane. Circumstances did not deter Him. We are thrown by them. I am not sure how to help you so you are not in that sad lineup with the disciples.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we cram so much into life; we listen to so many voices; we are so busy, we miss the signs.

Recently I participated in a twenty-four hour silent retreat. The silence lasted from lunch one day up until lunch the next day. We ate three meals in silence. We had no cell phones, no computers, no technology of any kind. We were given one aim: "do nothing." Listen, but do not try to force anything.

After it was over, person after person shared experiences of encouragement, comfort, and the presence of God in a way that spoke to each person. It was as if the silence and the "doing nothing" lifted us out of the pressures of daily life so that we could see the signs of God which are already there.

Signs can be good and bad. When you demand a sign from God because you are struggling to believe, you are not seeing the signs that are all around you. You are spiritually blind. Rather than demanding signs, perhaps you should pray, “Open my eyes, Lord, and let me see what You see.” God just can’t wait to let you see what He is up to.

Here are some signs I have experienced.

When considering seminary, I just wanted to take a class or two. A woman in my congregation said, “You should get an M-Div and be a pastor.” “I can’t do that!” I replied. “Sure you can,” she said. Then I went out to Fuller Seminary to check it out and the very first thing the admissions officer said to me was, “You should get an M-Div and be a pastor.” “Oh, I can’t do that!” I replied. “Sure you can,” he said. Two conversations that were verbatim. That was a sign.

During seminary I did an internship at La Cañada Presbyterian Church and went on an elder retreat. A few days before, I had been feeling nervous that I could never be a preacher and that I was too old to be starting! During the retreat out of the clear blue one of the elders said to me, “You look like a dancer. Were you ever a dancer?” (Surprised, I replied that I was.) He said, “Dancers are usually very healthy. You will probably live to be 94!” Then he said, “Maybe you will be the next Billy Graham!” I just laughed! The man knew nothing about my insecurities, but God had heard. God had given me a sign. Still today the reminder of that man’s random comments gives me the assurance of God’s presence.

Signs happen all the time. Signs are not dependent on good circumstances. They often come in the midst of hard times.

Once a lump appeared on my eyebrow. Being a cancer survivor, I was scared. I went to a doctor who did day surgery. In the middle of surgery he decided to take a bone sample. He took out a hammer and a chisel and started banging on my head! It felt horrible, as I was sitting there blindfolded and tied to the chair, like I was in the hands of a mad scientist. The nurse suddenly took my hand and whispered, “I’m praying. Jesus will help.” That was a sign to me.

Signs give direction.
Signs assure us of God’s presence.

I had been here two years, and I came back from vacation and you all had painted the education wing. And then you didn’t stop there. You tore out the old bushes and planted some new flower beds. You didn’t stop there. You hired staff and fulfilled goals set by the vision of the elders. That was a sign to me. I began realizing I loved where God has called me – to be a pastor, to preach, to not worry about difficult circumstances. I began to see the signs.

Signs encourage us to press on.
Signs give us courage to believe more fully.
Signs help us obey God with success. That’s what happened to Balaam.

The Pharisees and the disciples did not get it. God gave them signs. But, as the marquee says out on the lawn of this church, “If you repay good with evil, then evil will never leave your house.”

Jesus said the Pharisees' refusal to recognize the signs right in front of them was like an evil yeast, poisoning their ability to have faith.

What signs are in your life? Do you see them? What do you think God is saying to you?

Don't demand signs to prove God's existence, but trust the ones you are given, whether they are extraordinary or simple, realizing that God's signs become experience for us when we simply believe.

AMEN