

Second Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 4
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
1 Kings 18:20-39; Luke 7:1-10

- Cool Hand Luke
- Paul Newman, standing out in the road at night- it is pouring down rain - thunder and lightning - and he is yelling up to the heaven's - asking for a sign "Let me know you're up there- come on, love me, hate me, kill me, anything. Just let me know it."
- I wonder how often we have done that - maybe not that dramatically - but called out to God, asking for a sign - when we're feeling lost - or uncertain - or second guessing our beliefs - wondering if we're really alone - are you really out there?
- I suspect we more often ask God for signs as a way of bargaining with him - if you're really out there - or, if you really love me - help me - do this for me, get me out of this mess, keep me from getting in trouble, make sure I get that promotion ... if you do, I promise I'll be faithful, I'll change my ways, I'll do what I'm supposed to do, I'll be good
- In our Old Testament reading for today - Elijah asks God for a miraculous sign to prove a point - that the Lord is God and the people of Israel should follow him, not Baal
- King Ahab had married Jezebel, the daughter of a foreign king - and took her god Baal as his own - built an altar and a temple for him - and brought in hundreds of Baal's priests
- The Israelites were not ready to fully forsake the Lord, the God of their ancestors - but they figured they could cover their bases and worship both
- So, Elijah sets up a contest with the prophets of Baal - 450 of them - you set up an altar for a burnt offering and I'll do the same, but don't set it on fire - call on the name of your god and I will call on the Lord, the one who answers by fire is indeed God. I'll let you go first
- The prophets of Baal spent all day calling out to their god - come on, give us a sign - answer us! But there was no response
- Elijah then sets up his altar and offering - and for good measure - makes sure the whole thing is soaking wet - he then calls out to the Lord, Give us a sign - "answer me, O Lord, answer me so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God."
- And the Lord answers him - fire comes down from heaven - it consumes everything - the bull, the altar, the dust, and all the water - it must have been a truly impressive sight
- The people fall to their faces, saying "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God"

- I wonder how many of us are thinking - wouldn't that be nice - if the Lord would do something like that again?
- The nation of Israel had lost its way, its people were following after false gods - idols that encouraged wicked behavior and sexual immorality - while still thinking they could claim to be following the Lord.
- And so the Lord settled the dispute - making his power and presence undeniably clear - a sign the people could not ignore that proves the Lord is God.
- If he could do that again, that would be great, wouldn't it - proof of the Lord's power and presence - that shows the world our faith is real, that what we believe is true -
- But wait - how did that work out for Israel and Elijah? Actually, it was so great. Ahab remained a follower of Baal, the people were still divided, and when Jezebel threatened to kill Elijah, he ran away.
- Giant fireballs that come down from heaven on command might be impressive, overwhelming even - but they are not the kind of signs that lead to faith.
- We know that when people ask Jesus for a sign to prove his authority (the show why they should believe him) he doesn't do it - "a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign!"
- And yet, all the time, he is working miracles - like in today's gospel - he heals a slave who was close to death (without even going to him), an amazing sign of his authority and power.
- But that, I think, is not the most important "miracle" in the story. Really, the faith of the centurion is more impressive - even Jesus, the text says, was amazed at him - turning to the crowd following him - "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."
- And yet, I would say, the most miraculous sign of this story is found, not so much in a particular action, but in the relationships of the people involved.
- A centurion - in charge of over 100 soldiers - a military man with great power and might, working on behalf of the Roman army - part of the occupying force in Israel, a gentile - and probably a pagan.
- And then there are Jewish elders - well educated, influential, likely wealthy religious leaders - the centurion sends them to go to Jesus seeking help for a slave, the most marginalized and helpless class of people in that society.
- The centurion, a Gentile, a representative of the Roman Empire, appeals to Jesus, the embodiment of God's kingdom, on behalf of one completely "beneath" him, using Jewish elders as intermediaries.
- What is going on here?
- The need of the slave has brought together a community to work on his behalf for his healing. Jews and Gentiles, political, military, and religious powers setting aside their divisions and quarrels - to work across their usual boundaries to seek the health of one of the most disadvantaged members of society, a slave, who has no power or voice.

- That, I'd say, is the real sign in this story - of the kingdom of God - of the presence and power of the Lord,
- The presence of Jesus calls together this community that represents different cultures and social classes, working toward a common purpose - seeking the health of the lowest and the least
- Without the formation of this community, without their role, the slave might have never been healed. Someone else had to speak out for the slave - to ask for help - someone had to use their own power to enlist respectable messengers to carry the request.
- The real miracle is the formation of a supportive community that will do anything in its power to help the powerless, to speak for the voiceless, and to aid the sick and the shut-in
- You want a sign? There's your sign - you want to see it today - me too - lets go do it
- Its on us - to be the sign - if we want a way to show the world our faith is real, that what we believe is true - we have to go out live that way - we actually can forgive those sin against us, we really can love our enemies, we can use our resources to help the sick and the needy. The God who is a work in us, whose power enables us to do these things, is real - and is always with us - if you want a sign so that we can believe this, you have to go do it - the let your life and your actions be sign - a testimony - to the love of God.
- These are the kinds of signs that can lead to faith - not fireballs from the sky
 - Story of Oliver's Mom
 - Guy at the prison - mother is sick, he is upset and worried about her and can't get in touch
 - Deacon promises to check on her in the hospital - he didn't really believe him - later got a hold of his mother on the phone - I was looking up and saw this bright light - and I was looking into the light and then this face appeared over me, smiling - and he had white hair and a white beard, and I asked him - "am I in heaven?" And he said, "no ma'm - I know you son Oliver, he asked me to come check on you" That's when I knew that the Episcopalians were real -
- In our own church - going to see parishioners in the hospital - shut-ins in their homes - so appreciative of the visits, not just from me, but from all the other members of the church who have gone to see them - to pray with them, or bring them some food, or just keep them company for a while - it makes a difference
- Human community - us - plays an important role in the healing of others. Jesus is the healer, the power and the authority are his, but he works through us - through the members of his body - to accomplish his purpose.
- May we be that community of God for the healing of our brothers and sisters - may we be the sign of the reality of God's kingdom - the most loving people in town. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.