

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Signs and Wonders: Broadcast Delay”
John 4:46-54

Last week we began this new series “Signs and Wonders” in the Gospel of John. You might remember that we talked about how roughly the first half of John’s Gospel revolves around these so-called “signs,” these miraculous acts of Jesus during his ministry. But a sign, as John talks about them, as Jesus does them, aren’t just amazing occurrences. They’re meant to point to something. They’re meant to reveal something about Jesus. As John tells us later in his Gospel, they’re written down so that you might believe and have life.

Now everyone might have an idea in mind of what you would need to see to believe. What would you have to witness with your own two eyes that would convince you of something you didn’t otherwise believe? Usually that answer is, “Well, something pretty amazing.” But the truly amazing thing about these signs of Jesus is that each of them, in some way, subverts how we might typically think a miraculous sign should operate, and in so doing, reveals something about the glory of Jesus that is truly amazing, but never fully in the way the world expects.

Last week we saw Jesus using these dusty old stone jars to change water into wine at a wedding. And this week, we encounter another sign and a faith that, oddly enough, didn’t have to see to believe. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Nostradamus was reputedly a famous predictor of events far into the future. Economists and political theorists can on occasion outline the larger movements of geopolitics and market forces over the span of several years. Even weather forecasters can do alright at giving us a decent idea what the next few days would be. But what if you could only predict the future just five minutes ahead, nothing more?

That was somewhat my experience about three years ago. Frances and I were watching the Rose Bowl on New Year’s Day, featuring our beloved Georgia Bulldogs against the Oklahoma Sooners. Georgia won the game in dramatic fashion. Never mind what happened to us in our next game when we played Alabama in the National Championship, or when we played Bama the next year in the SEC Championship, or when we played Alabama last night. No need to bring that up. But for this Rose Bowl game, it was a great win.

Watching it, however, stretched our understanding of space and time. We had a few group texts going with friends and family members, and we noticed that others seemed to have this uncanny ability to predict when big plays would happen a few minutes ahead, being very happy right before something good, or to be very unhappy before something bad. We thought, this sure is strange, but then we realized that it was because we were watching the game over the Internet. We had cut the cord for cable service and were instead watching the game through an Internet-TV service. Catch is, and we didn’t know this at first, there was about a 3-4-minute delay between what we would see and what others would see if they were just watching regular ESPN.

Practically, what that meant for us was either getting a message saying, “That was awesome,” which meant we were on pins and needles waiting to see the next touchdown or big play, or we got a message saying, “Oh no,” with no more detail than that—drove us crazy—which meant we watched with paranoia waiting for something horrible to happen.

The point is, that broadcast delay, or really just a streaming delay, meant that something had happened, something was true, and we had been told about it, but there was still this odd, unsettling interim between when we were told about something amazing and when we would actually see it.

Something along those lines happens to this royal official that meets Jesus in John chapter 4. Jesus has come back to Cana in Galilee, the same place where he had turned the water into wine.

By now, though, word has spread about what Jesus has been doing, and this official hears that Jesus is back in Galilee. Sadly, the official had a son who was really sick. He lived in another town called Capernaum, which was about 15 miles away—doesn’t sound like much to us, that’s just like going out to Farragut for us, but 15 miles is a solid day’s travel if you’re walking the whole way. But he goes to Jesus in Cana and begs him to come back with him and heal his son.

All pretty straightforward so far, but here’s where things go a little strange.

Jesus says to this official, in v. 48, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” But though the timing might come across as a tad insensitive, Jesus is raising that tension that underlies these signs that he does: that unless y’all/they/we see signs and wonders we won’t believe, which on one hand is precisely the reason these signs are done and written down, as John tells us later, but on the other, kind of makes belief or faith feel like a bit of a sideshow if it takes some miraculous act to bring it about.

The official shrugs it off and asks him again to come to Capernaum to heal his son before he dies. And to that Jesus says in v. 50, “Go; your son will live.”

We find out in just a few verses that at that moment, fifteen miles away, the official’s son’s fever broke, and he started to recover. And Jesus wasn’t even there. He just said it and it happened. And that’s amazing.

But you want to know something even more amazing? It’s what happens right after Jesus spoke.

At that point, as far as the official could tell, Jesus hadn’t done a dang thing. Sure, he finds out later that right when Jesus said, “Go; your son will live,” his son’s fever broke, but that’s later. That’s the next day when he goes back. Here at this point, the official hasn’t seen anything. He’s trying to get this man to come back with him to heal his son. That’s what he wants. That’s what he came for. That’s what he walked 15 miles to do. And then Jesus, in response to the official’s plea, doesn’t do anything. No elaborate ceremony. No summoning clouds or thunder, no nothing, nothing that would indicate that something miraculous had just happened fifteen miles away. He just says, “Go; your son will live.”

Put somebody else in that situation; put me in that situation; and I’m saying back to Jesus, “Well that’s good. So how about we head that way now just so you can make sure?” I’m getting on the phone to confirm whether there had been any change in my son’s condition. I’m checking one of those live camera video apps so I can check in on him. That’s what I’m doing. I’m definitely not just leaving. I’ve got the attention of someone who might heal my son, but I at least assume he’s got to see my son to heal him. So, I’m not letting this guy out of my sight. That’s what any reasonable person would do. This Jesus says, “Your son will live,” well, let’s see. Jesus himself said y’all wouldn’t believe unless y’all saw signs and wonders, so here we are waiting for one of them signs and wonders.

But the man doesn't do that. What does he do? This is the truly amazing part.

"The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way." He believes Jesus, and then he leaves. Ironically shortly after Jesus just lamented how y'all/they/we won't believe unless we see signs and wonders, here comes this official who believes *without* seeing a sign or wonder. There had been a sign performed, but he didn't see it. All he had was something like the broadcast streaming delay for the Rose Bowl, in which something amazing had happened, he had been told it would happen, but he hadn't seen it yet. And he believes.

And a question comes to my mind. What was that walk back like for him? That fifteen-mile walk, that walk back to Capernaum the next day. If the walk back was anything like the delay during the Rose Bowl for me, then even though it was just a football game, and even though I was only getting vague messages like "That was awesome," and even though that delay was only a few minutes, if the walk back was anything like that delay during the Rose Bowl for me, then you could sure bet that I'd be making sure that something amazing happened, because I'd want to see it.

But something tells me that wasn't what that walk back was like for him. The text just tells us he believed Jesus and then left. Once he got home no doubt he was overjoyed, and it led to his whole household coming to faith. But it doesn't sound like his walk back to Capernaum was one of nervous anticipation, like me watching the Rose Bowl, but rather one of calm assurance. Jesus had told him of the salvation that had been brought to his household, and even though it would be some time before he would see that promise fulfilled, that was sign enough for him.

Friends, imagine that you are taking that fifteen mile walk back to Capernaum. What kind of a walk will you take? Because if you ask me there are two signs in this story. There's the sign of the boy being healed by Jesus, from a distance, no less. But then there's the sign of the official's belief which did not require seeing to believe, and that is a sign pointing to so much of what I believe belief in Jesus actually looks like: belief in the truth of the promises and assurance Jesus has spoken, belief that those promises are realized and in effect right now, but knowing that it might be some time before we see the visible, tangible fulfilment of those assurances before our own eyes.

On one hand, there's the kind of walk that says, "I still need to see it to believe it." Jesus declares that his son would live, but instead of belief, it'd be the father saying, "We'll see about that," and then rushing back home in nervous anticipation. Christ assures us that he is with us until the end of the age, but instead of belief, we'd walk in struggle thinking we're on our own. Christ proclaims that all authority on heaven and on earth has been given to him, but instead of belief, we walk consumed with anxiety over whether this one or that one would win an election. Christ promises God's care and provision, but instead of belief, we walk gathering unto ourselves, giving only out of what's left over or convenient. Christ declares from the cross, "It is finished," but instead of belief, we walk as if there remains so much more for us to prove. The Gospel declares, "He is risen," but instead of belief, we walk in constant fear of our own mortality.

On the other hand, there's the faith of the official that hears Christ and walks in belief. This might be an even more powerful sign: one that truly walks in the faith and assurance of the Lord.

Friends, you may be here this morning, whether faith is something new to you or something you've been around or even claimed for most of your life. Regardless, you might hear these assurances of Jesus, and you think, "Yeah I'm still going to need to see it to believe it." That's okay. A very normal thing to do. You're in good company. If faith is something new or strange to you, bless you. I hope God does put something, or better yet, someone in your life, that might

demonstrate his love and grace to you in a way that is simply unmistakable. But if Christ's other signs are any indication, rarely do they come in the way we'd expect.

If faith is something that you've been around or even claimed for much of your life, maybe you hear Jesus's assurances, bless you. Maybe you realize that you'd like to think you walk in faith but in practice your life communicates otherwise, and I hope puts something, or better yet, someone in your life, that might show how liberating and joyful a life walking in the grace of the Lord can be.

And if just maybe your walk truly is one that rests in the Lord and his promises, bless you. May God put your path alongside another whose faith may not be so sure, that they might see your faith as the sign that it is, believe, and have life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**