

EPIPHANY Signs of the Times

Matthew 16:1-12

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Sunday, January 9, 2011

Chapel at 8, Sanctuary at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

The Italians put it this way:

Rosso di sera, bel tempo si spera, rosso di mattina mal tempo si avvicina.

In North America the saying goes:

Red sky at night, sailor's delight, Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.

Jesus says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, in Matthew 16, verse 2 and following, *When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*

That folklore about what portends from a red sky in the morning or night has been around for centuries, and crosses many cultures. It is common to many because there is some science to back it up. It has to do with whether storm clouds are in the east or west during the time of sunrise or sunset, and how the physical qualities of a storm affect the atmosphere, filtering all colors of the spectrum other than red from the viewer's sight.

What Jesus meant, of course, is that the Pharisees and Sadducees were asking for something they didn't know what to do with when given to them—namely signs. Indeed, the signs that the Messiah had come were embodied before them, and they did not recognize them. They could read the heavens for the weather, as any sailor near the Sea of Galilee might, but they lacked spiritual discernment and understanding; they lacked the willingness to recognize that God was present before them in the person, the miracles, and the teachings of Jesus.

I remember a number of years ago, while traveling in Israel, taking a small excursion in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, along what might have been the same route taken by Jesus and later his disciples in this passage. When we set out from shore, the water was calm and the wind was gentle and warm. By the time we reached the middle of the Sea (which is really a large lake), a strong, cool wind had kicked up, and the sun withdrew behind the clouds, causing any who had a sweater or sweatshirt to put it on. I remember how the waves hit the side of the boat in rapid succession, and we had to reach for support to stay on board.

In verse 39, of Matthew 15, Matthew tells us that, after feeding the four thousand, Jesus gets into a boat and crosses to the other side of the lake to the region of Magada or Magdala, to the west. Somewhat later, we don't know exactly how long, the disciples follow him in their own boats, no doubt by wind and oar. So when it says in verse 5, *the disciples reached the other side*, we can conclude that they might have been a little tired and hungry. Despite the fact that thousands had just been fed with bread and fish earlier, Matthew takes care to note that they had forgotten to bring any food along.

There are a couple of ways to think about this omission. On the one hand, you might think they could have at least carried some of the leftovers for the rest of the journey with Jesus! In fact, Matthew tells us there were a lot of leftovers. Earlier, in Matthew 15: 37 we read, *All of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.* On the other hand, however, you may sympathize with the mistake. How often, after having enjoyed a great meal at a restaurant and taken pains to ask the waiter to wrap up the leftovers, have you left the package on the table, or worse, overnight in the backseat of the car? Probably because Jesus had left ahead of them and they were in a hurry to follow him, and they were full, not yet thinking about their next meal, they left the seven baskets behind.

So they arrived empty-handed at the other side, just in time to see Jesus finishing his conversation with a group of Pharisees and Sadducees. As they approach him, Jesus comes toward the disciples and, with some flourish and Biblical allusion, says in verse 6, *Watch out, and beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.* Jesus was ingenious that way. He is carrying a metaphor from one side of the sea to the other, expanding it to convey a practical and spiritual lesson. When the disciples, having just arrived, hear Jesus say that bit about yeast, they make the first obvious connection with the topic of yeast, namely bread. They turn to one another and conclude he must be upset about the bread. Verse 7, *It is because we have brought no bread.*

They don't get it at this point. They probably assume they are in trouble for being so forgetful about those seven leftover baskets, maybe being wasteful. Jesus, however, is really weaving that metaphor from recent experience to describe, as one commentator puts it, "...the insidious teaching that can spread like yeast in dough,"¹ made fresh by his recent encounter with the Pharisees and the politically connected Sadducees.

We see this theme woven not only into Jesus' teaching, but in Paul's as well. In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5:7-8, the Apostle writes, *Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For the paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.* In Galatians 5:7-11, Paul encourages his readers to not stray from the teachings of the gospel. *You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.*

Jesus, and later Paul, understood what we know today in the church, or the workplace, or in our families: it only takes one or two voices in a meeting, a gathering, a parking lot, or near the water cooler, to create disunity among a body. It doesn't take a lot of gossip or misinformation or slur to turn believers into doubters. Sometimes, just a little placed in the right ears is all that's needed, knowing how it will likely come out of the mouth of that person and to whom it will be transmitted. Indeed, *a little yeast leavens the whole dough*. Jesus was right about that. He knew that, sometimes with honest intentions and sometimes with malice, the religious establishment of his day was working overtime to counter the message that the kingdom of God has come in his person, his ministry; he knew how their false teachings could rise in the body of new believers. They were testing Jesus and his followers, which is why they came to him by the shore that day. In doing so, they didn't realize they were really testing God.

All the signs were there. Look back to Matthew 15, verses 30-31. The sick healed, the hungry feed, and the lowly lifted up. Jesus, his miracles, and his teachings were in the center of it all. But only a few could recognize the signs that God had come in this teacher whose authority came not from man, but from God.

Someone once quipped, "I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their good intellects."² Jesus' opposition was not ignorant of the religious heritage they shared with him. They had studied it well, and were informed. Some, as the Pharisees and Sadducees in this passage, were cynical in its application to the political and religious life of their communities. Some might have been well intentioned in their desire to follow God's laws and precepts. As the Psalmist says, *Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked...but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night* (Psalm 1). Indeed, throughout the Old Testament, religious leaders are warned against false prophets. Deuteronomy 13 says, *If prophets or those who divine dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents...You must not heed [their] words...for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord with all your heart and soul.*"

So it makes sense for them to wonder, but in this instance their suspicions were misguided, their anxieties unjustified. Jesus was reminding the disciples not to follow that path of suspicion or anxiety. As New Testament scholar Douglas Hare puts it, "In Jesus' ministry, God is present and active. The disciples have witnessed the evidence. Instead of demanding certainty, as did the Pharisees and Sadducees, the disciples must remember and let the memory of God's goodness overrule the anxieties of daily life." How many times have we been pulled through difficult experiences by the memory of God's help in other difficult times? How often has this memory saved us from the path of suspicion or anxiety? Indeed, like the disciples, we must trust in daily bread...unleavened by undue skepticism or cynicism, which is cheaply produced and abundantly available...and seek the more precious thing. What does Paul write? *Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

I recently finished the novel *The Imperfectionists*, by Tom Rachman, about the life and times of an international newspaper staff based in Rome. In one of the chapters, the obituary writer, Arthur Gopal, goes to interview an Australian intellectual who is near the end of her life, to get all his facts straight for his article about her. I found the exchange in the book interesting, and somewhat reflective of our contemporary, even local, culture. In the interviews the woman says to the reporter, "I longed for achievements, to be influential—that, in particular. To sway people. This has been my religion: the belief that I deserved attention, that they are wrong not to listen, that those who dispute me are fools. Yet, no matter what I achieve, the world lives on, impertinent, indifferent—I know all this, but I can't get it through my head. It is why, I suppose, I agreed to talk to you. To this day, I'll pursue any folly to make the rest of you shut up and listen to me, as you should have from the start!"³

What's intriguing to me about that quote is that this character, on the one hand, owns her vision for life so completely and continues in her pursuit of it; at the same time she acknowledges it as folly. There is a fatalism to finally center one's religious views, one's ultimate convictions in life in "the belief that I deserve attention, that [others] are wrong not to listen, and that those who dispute me are fools." This is a religion commonly practiced in our culture, but it is far from the way of Jesus, which is rooted in the conviction that it is God's word that deserves our attention and gives us life...and life beyond ourselves! It is Jesus who points us in the way, which does not rely on our own powers to persuade or save, but on God's gracious power to welcome us to his kingdom and redeem us from our sins.

To live in the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth is to remember God's faithfulness to his people. It is, just as Jesus reminded his followers, to remember the bread he provided to the four thousand, reminiscent of the manna the LORD provided in the desert in the time of Moses, and the daily bread he grants us today, which is not only sufficient, but overflowing with plenty left over. In fact, God's pattern is that often the worse the circumstances, the more evident are the ways he draws us closer to him and to his care. For it is often in times of want or need that the clarity of our calling in Christ is clearest, and when we are tested to see if we will lean into his power, his way, his grace all the more.

This is the heart of Jesus' warning to the disciples, the word we may take to heart today. In Jesus Christ the kingdom has come. The signs are everywhere: he is present and active in our church, our families, our community, and our individual lives. We need not allow a bitter yeast to grow, but rather see the signs that Jesus is present loving and nurturing, challenging and blessing, calling us as his followers into his celebration to which all are invited... all who have ears to hear and eyes to see the signs.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Douglas Hare, *Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 184.

2. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Tribeca Books), Chapter One.

3. Tom Rachman, *The Imperfectionists* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2010), Chapter Two.