

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Matthew 12:38-42 at Victory of the Lamb on November 6, 2016.

Series: Who Is This Man?

Today's Focus: Three Days That Changed the World

"The Greatest Campaign Sign of All-Time"

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Are you looking forward to Tuesday this week—November 8th, Election Day? Are you excited to cast your vote for your favorite presidential candidate? I've been amazed compared to previous elections how few campaign signs I've noticed in people's yards. Sure there are some. Maybe you've got one in your yard and that's fine. But it seems to me that people have put out far less signs than they did 4 years ago for sure. And I guess I'm not surprised because in general, people in this election are as disillusioned and disappointed and downright disgusted with the choices in presidential candidates as they've ever been. Maybe you feel this way too.

Well if so perhaps you can relate better to the Jewish people who lived in Jesus' day (and remember Jesus was himself a Jew) who experienced one disappointment after another in the people who were in a sense campaigning for the messianic votes of people's hearts. For example, in the New Testament book of Acts, we're told about a guy named Theudas. Here's the quote: **"Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing"** (Acts 5:36). According to a Jewish historian named Josephus, this guy Theudas claimed to be the Messiah. His campaign promise was that he was going to lead the Jews in a valiant overthrow of oppressive Roman rule. He claimed he could part the Jordan River and make the walls of Jerusalem fall down like Joshua in the Old Testament. This would be his campaign sign that he was the Messiah. But what happened? Theudas was captured by the Romans. They decapitated him in front of the crowds. Game over.

Then we're told about a guy named Judas the Galilean. **"After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered"** (Acts 5:37). You know what the backstory was here? This guy Judas the Galilean founded a group called the zealots. They were ultra-Jewish nationalists who opposed paying taxes to Rome. Well what happened? He and two thousand of his were followers were crucified. Their crosses were left standing across the countryside because the Romans wanted to send a message—that if anybody else gets any bright ideas about not paying taxes, Rome has plenty more crosses.

But then there's Jesus. If people today know anything about Jesus, it's that he was crucified. He died brutally and painfully nailed to a Roman cross. Yet there's something remarkably different

about his story, isn't there? Because everyone else who died on a cross was soon forgotten. Their followers scattered. Their movements failed. And yet with Jesus, something totally, amazingly, incredibly different happened. A church was born. A movement began.

And as a result the cross has become the most widely recognized symbol in the world. The cross which was the symbol of Rome's great might has been transformed into the symbol which reveals the mercy and love of God. The cross has been transformed from an expression of the ultimate threat of punishment into an expression of the ultimate hope for people who are suffering horribly. If the Son of God choose to suffer then and there on the cross, then we know he really could actually care about our suffering here and now. The cross of Jesus Christ has come even to express the exact opposite of its original intent—that a symbol of crushing defeat has been transformed into a symbol of victory.

How is this possible? Because of the Greatest Campaign Sign of All-Time. Because the Greatest Campaign Sign of All-Time belongs to Jesus Christ!

Jesus himself talks about this sign in a conversation recorded by one of his biographers, Matthew, where it says: ³⁸**Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."**

Now the thing we need to understand is that in context, this was not a polite request for more supporting information. This was essentially a demand of these Jewish religious leaders and experts for Jesus to perform a miracle to prove himself. Except that there was nothing they were even willing to accept as proof that Jesus was the Messiah anyway. They'd already passed judgment on Jesus. They'd already made up their minds.

In fact Jesus had just driven out a demon from a man who had been blind and mute. It was an undeniable sign which pointed to the authority of Jesus as the very Son of God, the true Messiah. But they refused to believe it—so hard were their hearts. Without even denying the authenticity of the miracle they insisted, **"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons"** (Matthew 12:24). This prompted Jesus to call them to account for their stubborn unbelief.

³⁶**But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.** ³⁷**For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."**

Why did the Pharisees and teachers of the law ask Jesus for a campaign sign to prove his authority? Because Jesus called them to account for their sins. He told them that God would hold them accountable on the day of judgment for every single empty word they spoke. Now on the one hand it's easy to find fault with people's idle words, isn't it? In this political campaign for president we've heard interactions caught on camera and live mics, heard words

from deleted emails, heard words from transcripts of speeches delivered to private groups and corporations, and so on. It would be easy to rise up and stand in judgment over the candidates for their words, wouldn't it?

But what if there was audio/video footage of every empty word you've ever said? Or if we had a server record of every email, every text message, every Tweet or comment you've ever composed? Or how about every transcript of every conversation? Would you or I be able to stand up in the courtroom of public opinion much less the courtroom of God on the day of Judgment? Not a chance. We would be condemned. We would all together be condemned to an eternity in hell. But that's why it's a good thing that Jesus has the greatest campaign sign of all-time!

³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

Notice something here first of all. Jesus believes that the Old Testament is true. He refers to the Old Testament as a true, historical account of what actually happened to people who actually existed. There was once a prophet of the Lord named Jonah. He was a bit reluctant (to say the least!) when God called him to go and preach to the wicked people of Nineveh which was the capital of Israel's arch enemy Assyria. So Jonah tried running away from the Lord instead. He went sailing away on a ship until he found himself a castaway thrown into the sea. Then right as all seemed lost, God provided a huge fish to swallow him up even as Jonah plunged deeper and deeper into the depths of the sea. Yet on the third day, with the cords of death wrapped around his neck, when all seemed dark and hopeless and lost, God caused the fish to spit him up on dry ground alive.

Jesus said his campaign sign would be an even greater real time three day story. **For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.** What's the campaign sign on which Jesus chose to stake his entire claim of being the Son of God our Savior? His own death and dramatic resurrection on the third day. In other words everything would come down to this—Jesus predicting his own death and resurrection as the decisive proof that would validate his claim on everyone's body and soul. Because if this sign were to come true, if Jesus were to rise from the

dead, it would be irrefutable proof that everything Jesus said and stood for is trustworthy and true. If this sign were to come true, there would be no aspect of your life that wouldn't come under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

One thing to keep in mind as you listen to these words is that according to the Jewish way of thinking, any part of a day was reckoned as a day/night. Hence Friday was day one. It was the day Jesus died in agony on the cross. The question is why? Well it wasn't that he made a miscalculation in his campaign to be the messiah. Rather Jesus made it perfectly clear: **"The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again"** (John 10:17-18). In other words Jesus willingly submitted to death as part of a bigger plan, God's plan to save sinners like us. Even greater than suffering the physical pain of crucifixion what Jesus went to the cross to endure was the just judgment of God for every idle spoken word and every unbelieving human heart. He took the penalty for the sins of the entire world. He literally died in our place. And he loves you so much that he did it willingly.

And so Saturday was day two. The day Jesus body lay buried in the tomb. You ever wonder why there was a Saturday...why not just skip right to Sunday? Author John Ortberg says this about Saturday, "So far as we know there has only been one day when literally not one person in the world believed that Jesus was alive." This isn't Easter Sunday. It's not Good Friday. It's Saturday—the day God remains silent.

Why? I wonder if it's because so much of life seems to be lived on a day like that Saturday, doesn't it? The in-between day. The day between despair and joy. The between confusion and clarity. You know this kind of day? The day after a prayer gets prayed but there doesn't seem to be an answer. You lose a job. You lose a friend. You lose your health. Your marriage is falling apart. You have a dream for your child. Things aren't get better. They're getting worse. You don't even know what to do. You have to go on but you don't know how. Even worse, you don't know why. It's a Saturday—the day God seems to remain silent, the day you want to cry out, "God, why aren't you listening?" You ever have days like this?

But there is hope even when God seems to be silent. There is hope even in the deepest pain. Because the greatest campaign sign of all-time belongs to Jesus Christ. It's a three day story remember. On Saturday God seemed to be silent, but Sunday was still a-coming! **"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."**

Why do I believe in Jesus Christ? Because he is the only one in all of history who consistently, repeatedly, and boldly predicted his own death and resurrection, declared it as the decisive campaign sign for his claim on being the Son of God our Savior, and then pulled it off exactly according to plan! There is no reasonable explanation for the sudden rise of his fame, there is no reasonable explanation for the willingness of his followers to go out into the world ready to die in his name, there is no other religion in the world that can trace its origin to a resurrection centered in one unique person who came through with so great a promise as this. Because our God is not dead. He is alive. Jesus Christ is alive! And because he lives so does hope. So does peace. So does joy.

So what? Listen, friends, I know it's tempting to seek signs of God's goodness in the good things he allows us to enjoy. And God does so often grant us many gracious gifts of his goodness in this world, in this country. But don't mistake such good things as substitutes for having a relationship with God himself. Don't mistake such good things as a successful career, money, good health, peace or prosperity as your ultimate proof that God exists and that he is good. Because when we do this and seek signs of God's goodness in the things we think are good, then we are just like the Pharisees. But Jesus says that just one sign is sufficient to know that God is good. Just one sign is sufficient to have a relationship with God and to cast your vote for Jesus as the Lord of your life. And it's the greatest campaign sign of all-time. It's the sign that proves that Jesus is the Son of God, our Savior...his resurrection from the dead just as he promised.

Remember, it's a third day story. It's the pain of Good Friday, the silence of Saturday...and the tomb bursting joy of Sunday! What does this mean for you? It means your condemnation has been taken away. It means it's ok to cry to cry out to God when it still hurts. And it means no matter how dark the Saturday of your life seems right now...one day...some day...your Sunday's coming too. Hang on to Jesus. Cast the vote of your life with him. He makes all the difference. Jesus has the greatest campaign sign of all-time. Amen.