21st Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1967

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

In Nomine Jesu

St. John 4: 48-50 Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." The official said to Him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went his way.

WHY?

The hardest question in the world to answer is the question, Why? At the age of 3 or 4, children begin to ask at the most disconcerting moments about the simplest matters, Why? Try to find an answer for some of those questions, and you will see how difficult it really is!..... The questioning process begins simply enough: Why can't I have that?...Why must I do this? The questions become progressively tougher as children get older: Why does it thunder and lightning?... Why do I have to go to bed so early?...Why do I have to go to school? Eventually the WHY? is stirred by curiosity and perplexity: Why am I a boy instead of a girl? or a girl instead of a boy?...Why did God make the world?...Why does God do things the way He does?...Why am I unhappy and disappointed?...Why must this happen to me?...Why do innocent people suffer while wicked people prosper?..... You can see the questions have become quite adult. Evidently there is no end to the ever-lasting WHY?

Almost the whole book of the prophet HABAKKUK in the Old Testament is devoted to this one word question: WHY? The prophet begins: O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and Thou wilt not hear? Or cry to Thee, "Violence!" and Thou wilt not save? Why dost Thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is slacked and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted. God answered the prophet's question with the news that He was stirring up the Chaldean armies which would sweep down upon the prophet's own people to destroy them without mercy. The prophet's question was answered, but he had another: Why dost Thou look on faithless men and art silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? How can You, God, punish my own people through men who are more violent and wicked than we ever were? God answered the prophet's question by telling him to be patient. After the purification of

God's own people through suffering, the Chaldeans themselves would be utterly destroyed. This actually took place when Cyrus, the Persian, entered Babylon and crushed the power of the Chaldean empire..... Satisfied, the prophet concluded with a hymn of faith: Though the fig tree do not blossom, no fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength.

This is faith - trusting in the goodness of God in spite of all appearances to the contrary. Concerning such faith in God, Habakkuk (became touchstone of Reformation) wrote: THE RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE BY HIS FAITH. The proud and the wicked shall eventually be destroyed, but the man who has faith in God shall truly live - now and forever.

The road to faith is pretty hard to take, particularly when there are so many questions - all of them with the same ingredient: WHY? This is a tough question to answer - even for faith. How can one take it on faith that God is good - when He expects us to believe so much on the basis of so little evidence?... Take the whole question of life after death. Why is it that you can put everything the Bible says about life after death on about four pages? Doesn't God realize that we want to have a little more information about something that is so important to us as life after death? Why does He demand that we take everything He has to say on faith?

We look for positive direction in our lives. Standing at some crisis we plead: God, just one clear word - just one definite sign - that's all I need. Vietnam - Red China - Asia - Russia - Human rights - political and social unrest - a modern psychic predicts another World War by 1970 ---- confronted with all of these questions, we ask God for a sign: God, just a hint of what is going to happen What do we do? Where do we go? What can we expect? The heavens are silent. God just doesn't give that sign.

Why? Christ answered the question for us when He spoke to that official: UNLESS YOU SEE SIGNS AND WONDERS YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE. We are not ready for faith, though we are ready for some demonstration we can understand. We prefer to have

everything laid in clear lines so that we can make our own decisions on the basis of the evidence at hand. God insists, however, that we walk by faith and not by sight - that we believe without evidence. WHY? Now we have to call upon the answer we often give to our children when they ask Why? -- BECAUSE, THAT'S WHY!

God has His own reasons for acting the way he does, and we have to take Him the way He is. It is in our best interest to take Him the way He is - because He is God and we are men.... If He wants to, God can give a sign. When He considers it necessary, He does give signs and wonders. Take GIDEON, for example. Gideon asked for a sign, and the Lord said to him: I'LL GIVE YOU A SIGN. PUT OUT YOUR FLEECE AND TOMORROW MORNING EVERYTHING ELSE WILL BE COVERED WITH DEW, BUT YOUR FLEECE WILL BE DRY. Gideon still did not believe - so God said: TOMORROW YOUR FLEECE WILL BE COVERED WITH DEW AND EVERYTHING ELSE WILL BE DRY. Convinced by the sign, GIDEON reluctantly did what God wanted him to do. A great victory resulted, contrary to all expectations. In the end, however, the sign did not have much effect upon GIDEON himself. Inflated by his conquest of the Midianites, he eventually forgot about God who had demonstrated so graphically His goodness and power.... It took one sign after the other to bring Moses to carry out his various tasks. In the end even this great man was a disappointment to the God who had entrusted him with so many evidences of His protective might.

When Christ was born, God gave a sign of a different character: This shall be a sign unto you: you shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger... At the wedding of Cana, Christ performed His first sign, turning water into wine. Every miracle He performed was a sign - a sign that God was at work in the world, that His Kingdom was breaking into human history, that the hold of sin and death was about to be broken. Every sign had a purpose: to encourage faith - real, lasting faith that would no longer require a sign - faith willing to take God at His Word simply because God had spoken.

You find faith of this kind in the most unlikely places. The son of a Roman official at Capernaum was ill. When the father heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he came to Jesus and pleaded that He come down and heal his son,

who was at the point of death. JESUS SAID TO HIM, "UNLESS YOU SEE SIGNS AND WONDERS YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE." THE OFFICIAL SAID TO HIM, "SIR, COME DOWN BEFORE MY CHILD DIES." JESUS SAID TO HIM, "GO, YOUR SON WILL LIVE." THE MAN BELIEVED THE WORD THAT JESUS SPOKE TO HIM AND WENT HIS WAY. AS HE WAS GOING DOWN, HIS SERVANTS MET HIM AND TOLD HIM THAT HIS SON WAS LIVING. WHEN HE ASKED THEM THE HOUR WHEN HE BEGAN TO MEND, THEY SAID TO HIM, "YESTERDAY AT THE 7TH HOUR THE FEVER LEFT HIM." THEN - and only then - did the FATHER KNOW THAT IT WAS THE HOUR WHEN JESUS HAD SAID TO HIM, "YOUR SON WILL LIVE." AND HE HIMSELF BELIEVED AND ALL HIS HOUSEHOLD. THIS WAS NOW THE SECOND SIGN THAT JESUS DID WHEN HE HAD COME FROM JUDEA TO GALILEE.

The man believed Jesus. He took Him at His Word. This is the essence of faith. It is also the essence of our problem... We say, Yes, I believe, BUT.... Right there, with that reservation faith stops and unbelief or unfaith begins. God says, SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND EVERYTHING ELSE WILL BE ADDED TO YOU. We say, Yes, God, I believe, BUT...I've got to take care of myself just in case You don't. With that BUT... faith is stripped of everything that makes it faith. God says, CAST ALL YOUR CARES UPON ME. I WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU. DON'T WORRY ABOUT TOMORROW. TOMORROW WILL TAKE CARE OF ITSELF. PUT YOUR LIFE IN MY HANDS. We say, Yes, God, BUT...we have to make sure there is a way out in case You let us down. That's where trouble, grief, and anxiety begin. We have our own adult way of asking the childish question, WHY? WHY YOUR WAY, GOD? WHY NOT MY WAY?

We like to think that we would believe if God would work signs and wonders. If someone came back from the dead - if God would write a fiery message in the sky, we would believe. Actually, we wouldn't believe at all. When a man stands between nothing and nothing, between time and eternity, with a world crumbling about his feet, there is only one thing left to say: I BELIEVE. To that I BELIEVE God Himself says, AMEN.

When God speaks, faith says, AMEN. Faith is a miracle - the work of God Himself through His Word. The Roman Centurion believed. The miracle came before - NOT after - the sign, the healing of his son. He took the risk of believing THE WORD THAT JESUS SPOKE TO HIM AND WENT HIS WAY, believing His son was healed.

We have good reason for believing God. He has given us the sign of our Baptism - THE WASHING OF WATER BY THE WORD. It is the WASHING OF REGENERATION AND RENEWING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. He has given us the sign of the Holy Communion - the reality of Christ's own body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine as the surety of His forgiveness and peace. He has given us the sign of Christ's Cross - the sign of the Gospel with its offer of forgiveness and life - the sign of heaven at the end of this stumbling existence. We have plenty of signs, BUT GOD MUST BE BELIEVED. God has shown that He cares. He has taken our guilt and our pain into His own heart through the death of His Son. We have the sign of Christ's empty tomb - the sign that Christ lives to give us life and to give it more abundantly - the sign that He is the Resurrection and the Life - the sign that even now life is ours if we will but take it from His giving Hand. This GOSPEL IS THE POWER OF GOD UNTO SALVATION TO EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES.

In the face of that Gospel it remains for us to cry out: LORD, I BELIEVE, HELP THOU MINE UNBELIEF. Amen.