Follow the Signs… Trust the Word **John 4:43-54**
Trinity CRC, August 4, 2024 AM Rev. Richard J. deLange
John Series

Following up on Jesus' visit with the Samaritan woman and her Samaritan neighbours, we come to John 4:43. It reads,

43 After **the** two days [the days that Jesus spent with the Samaritans] he left for
Galilee. 44 (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his
own country.) 45 When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had
seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, for they also had
been there.
46 Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine.
And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. 47 When
this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and
begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.
48 "Unless **you** people see signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never
believe."
49 The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies."
50 "Go," Jesus replied, "your son will live."
The man took Jesus at his word and departed. 51 While he was still on the way,
his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. 52 When he inquired as
to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "Yesterday, at one in the
afternoon, the fever left him."
53 Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to
him, "Your son will live." So he and his whole household believed.
54 This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee.

People of God,

On the first part of my sabbatical, Patsy and I travelled the southeast US. I'm more often the person who likes to wing it. Just start driving and see where we end up. Patsy, on the other hand, has a need to know the plan. So, we compromised. Actually, she was very sweet. She said, "Hey, it's your sabbatical. We'll do whatever you want." That ended up working well. But she was always ready with options for me that she had explored already before we left home. She had a multitude of pins on her Google Map.

All that to say that simply "winging it" would probably have been an exercise in wasted time and some frustration. It would be more about looking at signs than looking at the sights. We'd be wondering, "What is there to do around here? What is a must-see attraction? Where's the places to eat that you don't want to miss out on? And where will we park the motorhome for the evening?" Patsy had answers at her fingertip whenever I asked. She's a great navigator and you can borrow her for your trips if you like 😊.

Now, we didn't make plans for days or weeks at a time. We did it day by day. But we still needed a basic plan for each day. And I needed to hear all the great options which Patsy had resourced in advance to help create the daily plan. In short, she had pinned the signs on her map so that we could get to the sights.

In a similar way, reading through the book of John, it's important to know that John has a plan that he's unfolding—day by day or chapter by chapter—as he gives us the gospel of Jesus Christ. Pastor Tomas has led us through the first 4 chapters and you've heard how the chapters build on each other. John is helping us see who Jesus is and his mission. We saw in the Samaritan woman story that Jesus is the Saviour of all nations.

We also saw that Jesus is a miracle worker. As our passage today reminds us, Jesus performed a miracle in Cana where he turned the water into wine. That was John 2. But Jesus was always somewhat hesitant about performing miracles. Not because he didn't want to help people. He did. He had so much compassion for the hurting. Even for a wedding party Jesus had compassion when they ran out of wine which would have been a big embarrassment to the host. He cares deeply about every part of our lives.

But as much as Jesus can do miracles, he's always concerned about people following him for the wrong reasons. In travel language, he might be concerned that people fixate on the signs rather than seeing that it leads to a destination. Or as we sometimes say, he's concerned that we don't see the forest for the trees. That's the heart of our passage today. So let's dig in.

Unlikely Followers

The first thing to notice in this passage picks up on the last story. It's that unlikely people are coming to faith. If the last story about the Samaritans was about Jesus reaching out to unlikely people, this one is about unlikely people reaching out to Jesus and becoming his followers.

The opening lines of our text seem a little confusing. You might or might not know that Jesus once preached in his hometown of Nazareth which is in Galilee. The crowd scoffed at him, and his response was, "A prophet is not welcome in his hometown." (Mt 13:57). John reminds us of that right at the top of this story, though he says, "home country." That's because hometown could also be understood as home territory which is a broader term like country. In any event, after saying that, the next line of our chapter, v.45, seems to show the opposite:

> *Jn 4:45* *When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, for they also had been there.*

We could go to the other gospels for more explanations about what Jesus did in Jerusalem but John says this at the end of chapter 2:

Jn 2:23 Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name.

Some of those "many people" are said in chapter 4 to be Galileans who have now come to a different understanding of Jesus than they did when he first preached in Nazareth.

So unexpected and unlikely people are coming to believe in him. In Nazareth they chased him out of his hometown but now some of those people along with **other** Galileans are welcoming him and now "believing in his name." Sadly, as Jesus will point out, their believing is based too much on his miracles! One commentator said, "They are wanting a **Messiah** who will perform **miracles** to order, rather than moving on to the real **faith** which will grasp Jesus' hidden identity, the **Word** dwelling in the flesh." In any event, there is some coming to faith even if it is based too much on miracles and signs.

Meanwhile, Jesus **still** has "no honor" among many Jews, especially in the leadership in Jerusalem. There were still people of his home country looking to get rid of him. As all the gospels tell us, the ruling council was out to kill him which ultimately led to his crucifixion. Probably, John's biggest point in making the reference to no honor in Jesus' home country is to recall the kind of faith that was just seen among the Samaritans who are not part of the country and usually despised by Jews.

That brings us to another outcast in the mind of a typical Jew. In our text, the focus is on a certain royal official from Capernaum whose son is ill and near death. The Greek word translated "royal official" is *basilikos*, meaning "king's man." This person of high rank belongs to King Herod's officials. Herod Antipas was called the King of Galilee. His official could be a Roman but he's a probably a Jew working for the Romans. So, he's almost certainly despised by most Jews around him. He's considered a traitor among his own people. Herod has his royal officials throughout the land to keep tabs on things, to stop unrest or rebellion. To keep the peace.

But this is a time when the royal official before us is not at peace himself. His heart is breaking because his son lays at home in bed, very sick and nearing death. This man is desperate to get help. Anyone who is a parent can understand this desperation. We today are so accustomed to taking our sick children to the doctor and getting good help within hours. We can hardly identify with the desperation but there are times when nothing more can be done and we must face the same reality of this official that our loved one is dying. The desperation for this man because of his sick son has likely dragged on for some time. Long enough for the dad to have explored options and perhaps discovered that no one could help his boy. Anyone of us with a dying loved one can relate to this pain and struggle.

This official made the 30 or 40 kilometre trek from Capernaum where he lived to Cana where John tells us this story takes place. That would have taken several hours. Time he might have used to find a doctor closer by. Or you might

think he could have used this time to stay at the bedside of his dying son. We aren't told those details. All we know is that this boy is desperately ill. He's at death's door. There isn't a lot of time left. So this father must have believed in Jesus enough to make the trip, to give up on any other options and decide that Jesus is the only one worth pursuing. It is a gamble he decides is worth taking. He somehow knows Jesus is in Cana but he doesn't know if Jesus will still be there when he arrives. But he goes anyway because he has decided Jesus is his one hope for a cure.

This official is another striking example of unexpected people seeking Jesus. To a Jewish reader of the gospel and to the Jews seeing this official come to Jesus in his Roman clothing, makes him stand out like a sore thumb. This man is not worthy of Jesus' miracle. He's not "one of us." He's a traitor. He's a Roman ally and Rome is our enemy. So, to the onlookers, this man, like the Samaritans, is an unexpected and unlikely follower of Jesus.

What about in our world today? What about in our church? Is there someone or some group of people that we would consider to be unlikely followers of Jesus? Do you ever think that people who aren't like you could not become followers of Jesus? Is it because of their age or gender that you consider them unlikely to follow of Jesus? Is it because of their skin colour or culture that you consider them unlikely to follow of Jesus? Is it that their economic status or social class is wrong. Do they live in the wrong part of town or have the wrong kind of job? Do they speak the wrong language or perhaps use some foul language?

We might exclude people from being followers of Jesus when they are the ones **who know** they need him more than we ourselves know it. It's easy to consider ourselves in and think that everyone who is not like us doesn't belong. Meanwhile, they might be more hungry and desperate for Jesus than we have ever been.

So, Jesus welcomes unlikely people to be his followers. All kinds of people—including the royal official in our text. It's a good reminder to us not to exclude people for any human reason.

A homeless man walked into a church and sat in the aisle. People started to murmur and complain. Finally, one went to a deacon and asked him to do something. The deacon walked up to the man and sat beside him for the rest of the service. Another story I heard of was how a prostitute in Vegas went into a church and got saved. She was so excited, she brought several other prostitutes the next week. The people in the church were worried about their teenage boys and husbands. They told the pastor, "Do something or they're going to wreck what we've got here. They're going to mess things up." The preacher said, "I hope they wreck us." In other words, I hope they help to break us out of our elitism.

These stories and that of the royal official in Cana remind us to welcome all sorts of people into the church and into our lives as we all need Jesus equally.

Surrendered Followers

Next, though, let's see what Jesus is looking for in his followers. This royal official, this king's man, comes to Jesus looking for a miracle. That's clear. He wants his son healed. Nonetheless, **when** he asks, even begs Jesus to come and heal his son, he takes Jesus at his word. That's what Jesus is looking for—people who trust his word and surrender to him and his plan. Remember what happens. V.49 reads,

> *Jn 4:49 The royal official said (to Jesus), "Sir, come down before my child dies."*
> *Jn 4:50 "Go," Jesus replied, "your son will live."*

And here's the man's response.

> *The man took Jesus at his word and departed.*

But note what Jesus says just before this, in contrast to what happens next. In v.48 Jesus speaks harshly.

> *Jn 4:48 "Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."*

Let's see if we can figure out who the "you people" are in this verse? Is Jesus talking only to the royal official who asked him to heal his son? Is he saying, "You royal official types won't believe and follow me unless I do a miracle." That seems unlikely since the "you" there is plural. However, he could have had an entourage with him since he's a servant of King Herod. So, it is possible that Jesus is speaking to this single man and his entourage when he says in the plural, "you people".

However, it is more likely that the plural you and the story as a whole point to the "you" being not just this man but all the people watching and listening to Jesus. Verse 45 already moves us to that conclusion when it says that the Galileans welcomed him. Why? Because

> *Jn 4:45b They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, for they also had been there.*

Jesus is constantly fighting the desire of people to receive miracles just for the sake of miracles. We gravitate toward seeing spectacles that are unusual. It's like entertainment or something that is self-serving. We are amazed at the miracle but don't grasp the real point.

Girls and boys, it's like going on a trip and looking at the signs for all the beautiful places you could visit but you never go to the places. You're on your way to Jasper but when you see the first sign for Jasper as you're leaving Edmonton, you pull over in the car and get out. You stare at the sign. You take pictures of the sign. You say to yourself, "Jasper is amazing!" Would you do that? No, you'd say, "That's dumb. Who does that?"

Then why do we have signs? To point us to a destination, right! Like I said earlier, I needed a plan for the trip we were on. Where **are** we heading next?

Sometimes a small sign or a big billboard on the side of the road will grab our attention and get us to go somewhere we didn't think about going until we saw that sign. But that's the whole point of the sign, isn't it? Signs point us to a reality. But the sign is not the reality. A sign for Jasper is not Jasper. It is not a vision of the Rockies. It simply tells us which way to go. It points us forward.

And that's what miracles are supposed to do as well. That's why Jesus is troubled that people just see the miracle and say "Wow, that's cools!" But they don't look to what the miracle is pointing us to.

The passage tells us that this official came to Jesus looking for his son to be healed. When the request was first made, Jesus' response sounded kind of harsh,

> *Jn 4:48 "Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."*

The man is not deterred. He makes a second appeal:

> *Jn 4:49 The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies."*

Jesus is moved to help. And we read,

> *Jn 4:50 "Go," Jesus replied, "your son will live."*

Then comes the most important sentence in this section:

> *Jn 4:50b The man took Jesus at his word and departed.*

Let that sink in: *The man took Jesus at his word and departed.*

Do you get it? The man did not see the miracle happen but he trusted Jesus. And when he got home, he discovered that Jesus' word was true. Like Jesus' mother at the first miracle of Jesus in Cana, she trusted Jesus to help with the wedding emergency. She told him the problem and left it with him. And likewise this man heard Jesus' word and departed. He made his request. Jesus gave his word and the man believed it. Then next day he got home and found that his son was healed at the exact moment Jesus spoke his word of healing.

You see, friends, the miracle is a sign pointing to Jesus, not simply to something Jesus does that we can focus on and be mesmerized by. Granted it is worthy of amazement. **But amazement not for simple satisfaction but for surrender**. Jesus doesn't want miracles to be a sign unto themselves. But that's what so often happened when he performed them. People were amazed at the miracles and it stopped there. Or maybe they thought, "Hey, I could use one of those miracles myself." But they failed to look beyond it to Jesus who was God's Word made flesh; Jesus who spoke the creation into existence, Jesus who came so that we would receive more than physical healing. Jesus who speaks promises to us still today through the word the we can fully trust.

In both the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine and now this second miracle of Jesus healing the boy, the response is in John 2, "The disciples put their faith in him." And here in John 4, *Jn 4:50b the man and his whole family believed*. To be clear, both chapters use words which indicate that they **continued** to put their faith in him. In other words, they surrendered their life to Jesus and lived for him.

The man moved forward in faith, returning home when Jesus said his son was going to live. He didn't say, "But Jesus, I need you come home with me and touch my son before I can believe it." He went home trusting the word of Jesus. The word Jesus had spoken became flesh at the very hour Jesus pronounced healing.

The gift of faith is available to everyone. It's for you and for me. It's for Samaritans and Galileans. It's for Jews in good standing with their peers and those who don't measure up to the masses. It's for the pauper and the wealthy. It's for black, brown and white people. All of us. Let us put our faith in Jesus. That means surrendering to the one who ensured our eternal life, not just some physical healing. All who turn to him will be healed of our illness either in this life or the life to come. But we turn to him now knowing we need his gift of salvation now and without that we are eternally lost. **We surrender our lives to him in gratitude for his surrendering of his life for our sakes.**

More than any miracle from him, we need him as our Saviour and Lord. Let us surrender our lives each day to Jesus, trusting his word to guide us in all we do. His promises in his word are certainty for us. A miracle is wonderful. But it only reminds us to trust Jesus and follow his word even when we don't get what we ask for or have to wait to see it come. Just know that Jesus welcomes us into the family of God by faith, by trusting his word. And as we do so, giving our lives more fully to him each day, we see more and more of his glory and his blessings unfolding in our lives.

Amen.