



FIREFLIES AND BILLBOARDS

May 29, 2016, Second Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 18:20-39

Adam D. Gorman, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Lord, help us. Help us to see you in our midst. In the daily routine. In the small stuff and in the big stuff. Break into the silence and stir us. Consume us with your fire and comfort us with your wings. In your great Son's name we pray, Amen.

No, I haven't challenged hundreds of prophets in the face of death and asked God to cast down a fire to consume a soaking wet offering. That, I cannot say I have done. But I have asked God to reveal Himself to me. I have asked Him more than once. And you know what? I believe He has shown up and, during some of the times in my life when I have needed Him most, He has given me a nod or a wink.

There are times I believe He has reminded me that He is with me and that He has a plan for me. That when I have asked Him to give me a sign, something, anything, to let me know that He is with me – He has. Then again there are other times He hasn't. Perhaps I missed it because I was too consumed with myself or with earthly things to hear Him, to see Him, to smell Him, or to even touch Him or let Him touch me. Maybe I was supposed to learn something different from it. There are stories in the Bible where Jesus learned new things, so perhaps time does change things and even God's plans for us may change.

This morning's sermon had me struggling as to how I would address signs of God. I know some of you may feel like you are in silence, like God is not speaking to you right now, or perhaps He doesn't feel present to you or near to you. Others have asked for signs your whole life, that He is real, and you have yet to see one. Not a glimpse. But yet here you are. Seeking. Perhaps even seeing.



And if you are anything like me, maybe you have seen Him show up one minute and then the next minute you can't believe it or your faith dips just a bit and you need another sign.

Wherever we are this morning, in our faith, in our struggles and joys in life, today we are to be reminded, that God is with us. God is with us right now. He is beside us, behind us, within us, and all around us, we need to listen, to be persistent, to look at the world differently.

So, no, I am not going to tell you of a story when I asked God to bring fire down from the sky just for the sake of bringing fire down. But I am going to share with you some times in my life when I believe God did reveal a sign to me. Today, I am going to share just a couple brief stories with you about my call story. So I would like to apologize in advance for talking so much about myself. However, if you end up wanting to know more about my story, volunteer to be with the youth and me. Come on a mission trip with us one summer, or let's just get coffee and take it over to the park together.

One vivid memory of mine happened when I was a junior in high school. I grew up in the town of Westfield, New Jersey, and when I was getting on to become a middle-schooler, my mom got smart, and moved us over to the church across the street. She did that, because over there, across the street, was a church with a vibrant and active youth ministry, and an amazing new youth minister who built it up, and who she thought would be able to keep me in the church. Well, it worked. I found great friends across the street. Bunches of them. And we bonded deeply. But some odd things happened in that large youth group. There came a time when kids started dying.

This story isn't meant to depress you but to be shared with you so that you may know more about why I know God is with me every day. With us every day. Why I am here. Why I am sharing this story.



Pretty sure the Westfield Presbyterian Church Youth Group started losing kids between 8th and 9th grade. First it was my dear friend Ben Arnold, he was accidentally struck by a boat that his cousin was driving. Then it was Kevin Whalen who took his own life. And then it was Liesja Torterello. There were others but these are the significant ones for today's story.

You see, Ben was a Jewish boy who came to youth group every Sunday; thank God for our youth pastor who told us that, "any God he knew or could imagine would most certainly take a boy like Ben up to heaven. That of course Ben was in heaven with God and with the others. That God cried first." And then he said something similar in regards to Kevin, and then when it was time for Liesja, well there were no words, no answers. Just hugs and tears, and "Why, God?"

No answers as to why God could allow any of this to happen. Liesja was special. She was a church girl, straight-A honor student. She was a kind soul, kind to everyone. Not that the others weren't, just that she stood out. She seemed different than the rest of the world. The kind that was put on the earth to change the world. But here she was taken so young. Just on her way to the beach with friends. Innocence lost.

Why, God? How could you do this to us? How is it possible you are real if you could let such things happen to your children? Show us you are real, God. Show us she is with you. That THEY are with you. I thought I knew that Ben and Kevin were with you, Lord, but now another one. How can I know God? Tell ME. Show me.

Then it happened. The night before Liesja's funeral, a bunch of us were in the church basement. I couldn't take it anymore. Too much pain. Too much sorrow. Too many questions. I ran across the room and needed something. And there Jason was. Jason who had been her boyfriend. Who had been a great friend of mine and who I had nicknamed "Monster" because he was so big. A gentle giant who was a beast on the football field.



There Jason was and before I knew it he had me in a bearhug up off my feet. He told me he knew it was all going to be all right. That God was with her and that she was already in heaven. But I couldn't understand how he could know. I cried and I shook and I questioned and he whisked me away. We went out across the stream into the park to the gazebo. It felt like it was a cold, cold, clear, starry night, though it was the beginning of June. We dangled our feet off the side and looked out into the world and up to the sky. Up to God.

We went and we talked and we laughed and we cried and I wanted answers. I screamed and I cried some more and I pouted and I told God to give me a sign. And I believe he did. Jason and I both believe he did. In that very moment, on what felt like a cold, cold night in June. A firefly flew right up in front of us. It drifted up a little, swerved, just to the point that it was eye level to us and then it flashed. It flashed, like a lingering wink, and it stared right at us. And then just as it had flashed, it darkened, and then as fast as it had appeared out of nowhere, it swerved up and out of sight into the dark sky around us.

Call it what you want, but in that moment, and to this very day, I believe God showed me that Liesja was in heaven. That I would never understand why exactly bad things happen to such good people but that ultimately, love wins. God wins. And so do we.

And then there was the time I was graduating seminary and trying to follow God's call for me. When a pastor is seeking a church. When they are looking to be hired by a church and when a church is seeking a new pastor and have found who they believe would be best for the church, it is said that the pastor is "called by God into the ministry" of that church. I took the process very seriously. I listened as hard as I could. It was a struggle. There were a couple of times that I had to let churches go because I didn't feel "called" there. I could see myself there and see joy there but it didn't seem as though it was where God wanted me at the time.

Talk about stressful.



At one point I had to walk away from a big church. Bigger than this one. It was down to two of us and I felt the other person was called there and so I walked away. Imagine being a mom hearing such great things about a church. A church that even provided a five-bedroom house and all sorts of other things and her son walking away from it. It's because it wasn't right. It wasn't where I felt God wanted me at the time. I had to teach her and remind myself what it meant to be called versus what it meant to get a good job.

We are a family of the business world, not the ministry world, so it was different for us to learn about this "call process" that happens in the ministry world. It's not about the money or the perks. It's about the call, the position, where you fit, where God wants you to do His work for a while.

And so, as seminary was drawing to an end there were two churches that were in deep conversation with me. One was a beautiful church on the river between New Jersey and Pennsylvania and the other one was The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York.

The interview process to becoming a minister at a particular church can be long, it's very much like the pharmaceutical sales interview process. And here I was down to the end with two great churches. But I felt called to one more than the other. I could see myself at either church but one kept standing out more than the other. One jumped first and it wasn't this one. So I was worried. I was stressed. I could take one and have a great life and ministry. Or I could wait and see what the other one had to say.

It was STRESSFUL.

So then it happened. Peter Manning and I were on the phone late one Wednesday night when I was driving on my way to pick someone up from the airport. He told me not to walk away from Brick, not to take the other position. That he couldn't give me the offer but to trust the process. While we were talking, some of my stress was being relieved but being from the business world I knew nothing was



solid until you signed on the dotted line. It was hard. We kept talking and I kept praying and then it happened. Literally.

There was a billboard on the side of the highway, lit up, bright as day that said, “The choice is clear!” And I thought, “Ha, what a sign.” Kind of jokingly, kind of hopefully, kind of seriously, wishing, wanting, hoping it could be that easy. And then there was another one, exactly like the first, and then it was too crazy to be true but then there was a third and it was meant to be.

This doesn’t mean that my stress subsided and was relieved but it got me through another week. It got me to the point that I let the other position walk away into the sunset thinking this was where I was called. Don’t get me wrong, I was freaking out a bit, nervous as could be, but I was taking a leap of faith and later the next day, after the one call sank into the sunset and became but a distant dream or thought, I got the call from Charlie Higgins, and sighed in relief and then jumped for joy. Was it God that night on the billboard? It doesn’t have to be but I sure think it was, and here I stand, preaching in the midst of this wonderful congregation who called me here.

And if that sounds crazy to you, allow me to share one more thing. Later that month, after I had received the call to come live here and to be one of your pastors, Buddy and Gail Crutchfield invited me to celebrate over dinner. And so we did. We went out to a great little restaurant on the Upper West Side. It was a hot, muggy, perfectly clear summer day. Not a threatening cloud in the sky. No forecast of rain. Not an umbrella in sight. And then the waiter asked us if we wanted dessert. Whether we wanted it or not, the sky opened up and it poured. The whole city was caught off-guard, so of course we wanted to take a look at that dessert menu.

We ate dessert and continued to enjoy each other’s company watching everyone scramble trying to get out of the rain. Then when it was time to go and we walked out onto the street, there it was. A rainbow so big that it stretched completely over Central Park from north to south and south to north. It was the rainbow that made



the cover of the New York Times that summer in 2011. And in my family, rainbows are an important reminder of God watching over us, God protecting us, and in that moment, I knew for certain I had landed where God wanted me to be.

Was it a sign, was it providence, was it me trying to look into the tea leaves? I believe it was God reminding me that He was with me, is with me, that He has a plan for me greater than I could ever imagine, different than I could ever dream. It didn't mean the road would be easy, that it would be narrow and straight, not by any means. But to me it was a reminder that He's got it. That He's got me. That He's got you. That He has plans for all of us and that when we search the landscape sometimes we can see Him winking at us, nudging us, encouraging us along. It may not have been fire coming down out of the sky consuming an offering as in the story of Elijah. Then again, maybe it was.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.