Signs of God in the Gospel of John
A Note to Teachers

Hopefully, the lessons speak for themselves, but I thought it might be helpful to offer some quick thoughts on the goals and overarching themes of this series on Jesus’s miracles in John’s Gospel.

In this series, I want to take seriously John’s choice to use the word “sign” when presenting Jesus’s miracles. For John, the miracles point to something, and we can’t do justice to John’s Gospel without exploring what they’re pointing to. It’s often assumed that the signs point to the identity of Jesus. They reveal his power and, thereby, affirm his identity as Son of God and Messiah. That’s certainly true, and John tells us as much in his conclusion (John 20:30). But, within John’s theology, we can’t stop there. John tells us in his introduction that the Word has come into the world to reveal God. And throughout the gospel, Jesus will tell people that the Son speaks and acts as the Father speaks and acts. To see the Son is to see the Father. Thus, if the signs point to Jesus’s identity, they also at the same time point to God’s identity. The signs provide one way that the Word fulfills his mission to reveal God.

Therefore, as we study the various signs in John’s Gospel, we’ll spend time appreciating the details of each story; but we’ll always come back to the overriding question, “What is Jesus showing us about God through this sign?” That’s the main question to ponder as you prepare your lessons, and that’s the main question to discuss in class. Skip anything else that might prevent you from getting to that main point each week.

My thinking on the different stories and the topic as a whole has been most influenced by three books. If you want to dig deeper, you can’t go wrong with any of these:

- Craig R. Koester, Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community
- R. Alan Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design
- Charles H. Talbert, Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and Johannine Epistles

If you would like a quick primer on the signs in John, check out the following video by ACU’s own Curt Niccum:
- Click here (You’ll see a number of videos; scroll down to the one by Dr. Niccum)

Thank you for your investment in adult education.

Cliff Barbarick
Signs of God in the Gospel of John
Lesson 1: Introduction

Use an online tool like biblegateway.com (or a good, old fashioned concordance) to find every occurrence of the word “miracle” or “miracles” in the gospel of John. What do you find?

- The NIV yields one hit in John 7:21, but it is a translation of ergon (work).
- The Greek word dynamis, which is translated as “miracle” or “deed of power” in the other gospels, never occurs in John’s Gospel. Does John not include any miracle stories in his gospel? We can think of miracles from John, can’t we?

Brainstorm all of the miracles that you can remember that occur in the Gospel of John. (You can skim your Bibles if needed, of course.) What do you come up with?

- Possible answers (no need to list them all):
  - Water to wine in Cana (John 2), healing the official’s son (4), healing the invalid (5), feeding the 5,000 (6), walking on water (6), healing the man born blind (9), raising Lazarus from the dead (11)

So what’s going on? John, as you may have noticed, prefers to use a different word for miracles in his narrative. He calls Jesus’s healings and other deeds of power “signs.”

- Are the “signs” in John basically the same thing as the “miracles” or “deeds of power” in the other gospels?
- If so, why do you think John uses a different word? What different connotations do the words “miracle” and “sign” have?
  - “Signs” point to something other than themselves.

What are the signs in John’s gospel pointing to?

- At one level: Jesus
  - The signs both reveal and confirm Jesus's identity as the Son of God and Messiah.
  - John 20:30: John says that he records these signs so that, “you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”
  - Be careful, however. John is suspicious of belief that depends on signs.
    - Consider the negative (or at least ambiguous) portrayal of Nicodemus who is attracted to Jesus because of signs (3:2).
    - Consider the crowds who follow Jesus after he miraculously feeds them. Jesus criticizes them for following him because of miracles and missing the point of the signs (6:26).
    - In 12:37, John notes that signs ultimately fail to generate belief.

- At another, very important level, the signs point through Jesus to God himself.
  - We must remember why, according to John, the Word came into the world.
    - The opening hymn about the Word ends with the acknowledgement that no one has seen God, but the Son came to make him known.
    - The Son does this by speaking and acting as the Father does.
      - See, for example, 5:19-20 and 14:8-9
      - To see Jesus, therefore, is to see God the Father himself; and this results in life because, as Jesus says in a prayer to God, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (17:3).

Over the next six weeks, we are going to study the signs in John’s gospel, and as we do so, we’ll continue to ask, “How does this sign point to God? What does the Son reveal about the Father?” And our hope is that through these signs we can come to know God better and thereby experience the abundant life that Jesus promises will flow from knowing the Father.
Review from last week: John uses the language of “signs” to talk about Jesus’s miracles because they point beyond themselves both to confirm Jesus’s identity as the Son of God and to reveal the invisible Father through the actions of his Son.

Knowing that beginnings are important, I think it’s interesting to note the first miracles that Jesus performs in each of the gospels. Divide the class into four groups, and assign each group a gospel. Ask them to scan the first few chapters until they find the first miracle that Jesus performs.

What do we find in Matthew, Mark, and Luke?

- Mark: Jesus drives out an evil spirit (1:21-28) and follows that with healings (1:29-34).
- Luke: Jesus drives out a demon (4:31-37) and follows that with healings (4:38-40).

That’s a great start! We can see why the evangelists would open with these stories. They affirm Jesus’s power and confirm that he’s going to use that power in his ministry to heal hurting people and defeat powers opposed to God.

Now, what do we find in John?

- Jesus turns water to wine at a wedding party.
- Read John 2:1-11.
- What? This seems like a strange first miracle. Why open with this? How does this reveal his glory? Why does it lead his disciples to believe in him? Or, maybe more importantly, what does it lead them to believe? That Jesus is a good guy to attend parties with?

Several elements of the first sign reveal that, through Jesus, God is fulfilling old promises for the restoration and salvation of his people.

- By recording that Jesus addressed his mother as “woman,” John connects this event to some of the very first promises that God made to humans.
  - It’s an odd way to address his mother. The term does not denote disrespect (as a footnote in your translation might clarify), but it’s also not the normal way to address one’s mother.
  - Could the word be a link to a much earlier prophecy? In Gen 3:14-19, God announces curses for Adam, Eve, and the serpent. At this point, Eve is only referred to as “woman”; she doesn’t get the name “Eve” until 3:20. At the end of the serpent’s curses, God offers a promise for the future: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (3:15).
    - Could John be connecting the beginning of Jesus’s ministry to the fulfillment of the promise that God would one day crush the head of the serpent?
- More significantly, abundant wine often symbolized the restoration of God’s people after their suffering in exile.
  - Amos 9:11-15. Note the Messianic expectations expressed in the raising of the “booth of David.” The outpouring of wine coincides with the arrival of God’s Messiah.
  - Joel 2:18-27. Note also the wedding imagery (2:16) that is associated with the restoration of God’s people.
  - Isaiah 25:1-8. In this instance, the feast of food and wine is associated with God swallowing up death forever.

The symbolism of this first sign announces that the long-awaited restoration of God’s people (partially experienced at the return from Babylonian exile) is finally taking place. And as a corollary, the arrival of Jesus should be recognized as the arrival of the Messiah. This is what John hopes his readers will learn.
from the signs (remember 20:30?), and it's presumably what the disciples learn. Thus, they put their faith in him (2:11).

Jesus warns, however, that they will still need to wait a little longer for the fulfillment of God's promises.

- He initially tells his mother, “My hour has not yet come.”
- Throughout his gospel, John continues to remind us that we're waiting for the hour to arrive (see 4:21-23; 5:25, 28; 7:30; 8:20).
- The time changes, so to speak, once Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for his last days. Then he will say, “The hour has come” (12:23; see also 12:27; 13:1; 17:1).
- The hour toward which the whole gospel builds is Jesus's glorification in his crucifixion. So, in significant ways, the first sign anticipates the crucifixion when the promises will finally be fulfilled.
  - Note the many connections between the first sign and the crucifixion: in both stories Jesus refers to his mother as "woman" (2:4; 19:26); the wine in the first sign anticipates the outpouring of Jesus's blood at his crucifixion (19:34); the glory revealed in the first sign is most fully revealed in the crucifixion (17:1).

To come back to our overriding question in this series, how does this first sign point us to God? What does the Son reveal about the Father?

- It's best to let the class share their own insights, but here are some of my reflections.
  - This sign reveals something about the superabundance of God's blessings. His good gifts go far beyond what we need or expect. God doesn't want to provide simple sustenance; he's offering abundant life. And this has nothing to do with a “health and wealth” gospel. Abundant life has nothing to do with material comfort. Abundant life is knowing the God who shares his life gratuitously with his people.
Signs of God in the Gospel of John
Lesson 3: Healing the Faithful and Faithless

What's the difference between miracles and magic?

- There are, of course, lots of possible answers to this question. In this lesson we want to emphasize that in the ancient world magic was an attempt to control supernatural powers for one’s own ends.

The invalid by the pool of Bethesda seems to hold a magical view of healing.

  - Whether or not you think 5:4 is part of the original text,¹ the man seems to think of the pool as a magical talisman. He can use it to secure his healing by getting into the pool when the waters are stirred. God doesn’t work this way, however. This kind of thinking limits God’s freedom and binds him to certain rituals.
    - Notice that Jesus heals the man without being prompted. He takes the initiative and freely heals the man.
  - Are there ways in which we try to control the supernatural in a similar way?
    - Are there ways we treat the water in the baptistery like the pool of Bethesda? In what ways might we treat baptism like a magical ritual? (In so far as we think that through baptism we can secure salvation for ourselves, we are treating the baptismal waters like a magical talisman. God freely saves us in baptism; he’s not bound by the act of baptism like it was some magical spell.)
    - Can prayer become like a magic spell? (If we’re concerned with getting the words just right so that God will give us a positive answer, we’re treating prayer like a magic spell. If we’re worried forgetting “in Jesus’s name” at the end invalidates our prayer, we’re treating prayer like a magic spell.)
  - Why are we attracted to these ways of thinking?
    - A free God can be unsettling. How do we know what he’ll do? How can we be sure he’ll help us? Pay attention, however. The Son’s revelation of the Father in John’s gospel can allay these fears.

How does the man respond to his healing?

- He remains unresponsive to Jesus throughout.
  - He complains rather than answering Jesus’s first question (5:6-7).
  - He responds well enough to Jesus’s command to walk, but he just as quickly points the finger when challenged by the religious authorities (5:10-11).
  - He doesn’t even know who has healed him (5:13), and when he learns—after Jesus makes the effort to seek him out—he immediately betrays him to the Jewish leaders (5:14-15).
  - We see no evidence of the man coming to believe in Jesus.
- And yet, Jesus heals him.
  - We need to remember that Jesus does not perform signs as a reward for faith. That would be close to magic. (If I do X, God will do Y.) Instead, God remains free to heal even those who may never acknowledge him.

The royal official (4:46-54) provides an interesting foil for the invalid.

- Read 4:46-54.
- What differences do you notice between the invalid and the royal official?

---

1 The earliest Greek manuscripts do not include 5:4, and so some English translations omit the verse. If we remove the verse, it removes any reference to the God of Israel being involved in the purported pool-healings. It also makes it hard to understand the man’s desire to get in the water when it’s stirred (5:7).
• The official comes to Jesus (rather than Jesus taking the initiative) because he has heard about Jesus.
• He believes Jesus without even seeing that his son has been healed (rather than showing no evidence of belief even after experiencing a healing first-hand).

The royal official provides an example of a person who believes based on hearing (rather than sight). This makes him exemplary for John’s audience (and the rest of the Christians throughout history) who must come to believe in Jesus without seeing him. (See John 20:26-29.)

This story also addresses John’s ambiguous feelings about faith based on signs.
  o It seems to be a good thing that the official’s household believes when they realize Jesus healed their son (4:53). At the same time, Jesus expresses frustration with those who won’t believe without seeing “signs and wonders” (4:48).

• What’s the problem with belief based on signs? More on this next week.

For now, let’s close by returning to our overriding question in this series, how do the signs point us to God? What does the Son reveal about the Father?

• It’s best to let the class share their own insights, but here are some of my reflections.
  o These signs reveal God as the free giver of life. Healing is part of his nature, and he offers this gift freely, apart from our worthiness (and apart from any binding magic ritual). As Jesus says, God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous” (Matt 5:45). This might be unsettling; we might be more assured if we felt like we could guarantee God’s blessings through something we can say or do (like baptism or prayer). Jesus’s revelation of the Father shows us, however, that healing is our God’s modus operandi. When questioned about his healing the invalid on the Sabbath, Jesus responds that he is only doing the work that his Father is always doing (5:17, 19). The Jewish leaders miss the point: if healing is God’s work, it should be the work of his people too. Will we miss the point of the sign?
Signs of God in the Gospel of John
Lesson 4: The Bread of Life

In 6:2, John tells us that a large crowd is following Jesus. Why has such a substantial crowd gathered around Jesus?

- They've witnessed healings. They've seen signs, and now they're followers. That's good, right? Well . . . even though John recounts Jesus' signs in order to engender belief (20:30), we've noted that he's also suspicious of belief based on signs. So, let's see what happens.

John carefully notes the setting of the next sign. What time of year is it (6:3)?

- Which event in Israel's history does Passover commemorate?
  - During this festival, Jews would remember God delivering them from slavery in Egypt and providing for them during their wandering in the wilderness.
  - Such memories might also stir longings for the "second" Moses that Jews expected God would send to free them from their oppressor (Rome this time, instead of Egypt) and reestablish them in the promised land.
    - These expectations are based on some of Moses's final words. In Deuteronomy (Moses's lengthy last reminders before he dies and sends the Israelites into the promised land without him), he tells them that the Lord has said, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command” (18:18).

It is during this time, pregnant with the memories of Moses leading Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness, that Jesus miraculously provides food to the crowd of 5,000. (Read John 6:5-15.)

- Notice the disciples' role in this miracle. In his commentary on the Johannine writings, Charles Talbert highlights two things.
  - First, the disciples make the people sit down. As Talbert says, “they help prepare the people to receive from Jesus.”
  - Second, they gather the leftovers. That is, “they provide compelling testimony of the superabundance of Jesus' provision for people.”
  - They cannot provide for the people themselves; indeed, they correctly recognize that their limited resources are not up to the task. Jesus must be the one who provides. That does not, however, leave them without a role.
  - What might that mean for how we understand our own work as disciples of Jesus?

When the crowd sees the sign they connect the dots and identify Jesus as the second Moses, “the prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14). We'll see, however, that they haven't fully understood the significance of the sign.

- First “sign” of their misunderstanding: they want to make Jesus king (6:15). They've rightly identified Jesus as the second Moses, but they have not understood how Jesus will fulfill that prophetic role.
- Second “sign” of their misunderstanding: they follow Jesus for food rather than realizing that Jesus himself is what nourishes and gives life.

Jesus's admonition in 6:26 highlights the ambiguous value of signs.

- They've witnessed the miracle, but they haven't “seen” the sign; that is, they haven't understood what they were supposed to learn from the sign.
- The problem seems to be that signs risk leading people to place their faith in the wrong thing. They tempt us to believe in Jesus because of what he can do for us. Signs, however, are supposed to lead people to believe that Jesus is the Son and, thereby, to realize that he reveals to them the Father so that they can know him and experience eternal life.
Now for a hard question: In what ways are we like the sign-seeking crowd? Why do we follow Jesus?

- Think back on the prayer requests we shared at the beginning of class. What are we seeking?
  - It's okay to ask God for the things we need; he tells us to do so (see Matt 6:9-13), and he's happy to provide (Matt 6:25-33). We must always beware, however, the temptation to seek the gift instead of the giver.

Jesus feeds the crowd, but he also calls them to recognize that food only satisfies temporarily. He wants to offer them much more. They want bread, and he provides; but he also offers them himself, the bread of life that will quench all need. Will they receive it?

- In the end, most of the crowd does not receive the bread of life. They claim to want it (6:34), but Jesus's teaching is difficult and offensive, and they choose to turn back (6:60-61, 66).
  - What's so difficult about his teaching? He asks them to eat his flesh and drink his blood.
    - Their offense is understandable when we consider the prohibitions found in the Old Testament.
      - Gen 9:4: "You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood."
      - Lev 17:10-14: "I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in its blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life."
  - By offering his flesh and blood, Jesus offers to share his life with them.
    - This language clearly anticipates the crucifixion, when Jesus will literally offer up his flesh and blood.
    - At one level, eating his flesh and blood means embracing the crucifixion as central to Jesus's identity and mission. And if the Son is one with the Father—and if his mission is to reveal the Father—then this also means embracing the humiliating shame of the crucifixion as the revelation of the Father. (More on this in coming lessons.) That's a hard (and possibly offensive) teaching.
    - At another level, this teaching connects to the practice of the Lord's Supper. John does not have a Last Supper scene like the other gospels. At their last meal together, Jesus washes the disciples feet, but he does not institute the Lord's Supper. So, for John and his audience, this story provides the theological framework for that memorial ritual.
      - How does this shape the meaning of the Lord's Supper? How might it shape what that weekly meal means to us?

To return to our overriding question, how does this sign point us to God? What does the Son reveal about the Father?

- It's best to let the class share their own insights, but here are some of my reflections.
  - This sign reveals God as the Father who delights in nourishing his children. He is the one who provides for his children in the wilderness, the very place where our lives are threatened and we cannot provide for ourselves. In those places of need, God can (and will) provide over-abundant nourishment. But he doesn't stop there. God is not like some hidden benefactor who provides for the masses out of his excess wealth while remaining aloof from those he helps. God shares with his children the greatest gift: himself. He’s not satisfied meeting our needs from afar; he shares himself so that we might know him and experience the eternal/abundant life that far outstrips the things we so often seek.
Signs of God in the Gospel of John
Lesson 5: The Man Born Blind

In 9:1-41, John offers a tightly constructed story with several layers of meaning. To appreciate the story, it would be nice to hear the entire chapter in one reading; but it’s long enough that it might tax your class’s attention span. As an alternative, you might watch a video of New Testament scholar Dennis Dewey reciting the story (https://youtu.be/hA8w4Tn_xzk). He brings the story to life without being distracting (in my opinion). In your own preparation, you might also watch a second video in which Dewey discusses his interpretation of the story (https://youtu.be/hA8w4Tn_xzk).

When recounting this sign, John tells a story of two contrasting movements (summarized in 9:39). The man born blind moves from blindness to sight, both physically and spiritually. The Jewish religious leaders, meanwhile, sink into deeper spiritual blindness.

The whole story also serves as a commentary on Jesus’s claim, “I am the light of the world” (first in 8:12 and again in 9:5).

- In Jewish expectation, the Messiah would be a light to the nations and would open the eyes of the blind.
  - Isaiah 42:6-7: God tells his servant, “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”
- The same kind of language is also used for God himself.
  - Later in Isaiah 42, God talks about leading his people back from exile using the imagery of blindness: “I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light” (42:16).
  - In Psalm 146, the psalmist describes God’s saving justice for the oppressed. God feeds the hungry, frees prisoners, and “opens the eyes of the blind” (146:8).
- Jesus’s claim to be the light of the world, therefore, identifies him as the Messiah, equates him with God, and announces that God’s saving activity is underway. And Jesus’s healing the blind man provides supporting evidence for the claim.

The blind man’s response to the light progresses in stages.

- The man does not come to Jesus for healing; Jesus initiates the miracle “so that God’s works might be revealed” (9:3). So, unlike the royal official in John 4, the blind man does not seek Jesus out because he already has faith.
- When first questioned by his neighbors, the blind man refers to his healer simply as “the man called Jesus” (9:10).
- When initially questioned by the religious leaders, he professes that Jesus is a prophet (9:17).
- After being pressed further by the religious leaders, he denies their claim that Jesus is a sinner and asserts that he must be from God (9:30-33).
- Finally, when Jesus finds him after he was driven out, he confesses, “Lord, I believe,” and worships Jesus.

- Even though Jesus restores the man’s physical sight immediately, his spiritual sight evolves over time. The more he’s asked to reflect on what happened, the more he recognizes and asserts Jesus’s identity. Then, finally, a second encounter with Jesus leads to his confession of belief.
  - John writes his gospel to engender belief that Jesus is the Son of God (20:30), but he realizes this belief often results from progressive reflection on our initial experience with Jesus.
  - Can you think of any ways that your understanding of Jesus has evolved since your first experience of him?
Other characters in the story are not enlightened by the light. Why?

- The man’s parents turn away from the light because of fear (9:18-23). They fear the consequences of confessing Jesus is the Messiah; so, they choose to remain in darkness.
  - Note that their fears are justified. When their son asserts that Jesus is from God, he finds himself driven out of the synagogue.
  - Do we face any negative consequences for confessing Jesus? How do we respond?
- The Jewish religious leaders retrench themselves in darkness by stubbornly affirming their understanding of Scripture.
  - They follow straight-forward logic to reach their conclusion about Jesus. In Scripture, God has established the Sabbath as a sacred day. Jesus violates the Sabbath by making mud and opening the man’s eyes. (He easily could have waited one day to heal the man, thereby honoring the Sabbath without causing the man any further harm.) Since he violates God’s law, he must be a sinner. And if he’s a sinner, he cannot by God’s Messiah.
  - In essence, they blind themselves to the work of the living God because it does not fit within the framework of their interpretation of Scripture.
    - Charles Talbert writes, “If people feel the need for light, then help is forthcoming. But if they absolutize their blindness as sight, then help is impossible.”
    - This should scare us a little, I think. We’re right to affirm that Scripture is God’s inspired self-revelation that serves as the authority for our understanding of God and how we should live. The problem, however, is that we are always working with our interpretation of scripture, and we should resist absolutizing our interpretation in a way that blinds us to the ongoing work of the living God. The church has made this mistake in the past. Some of the strongest opponents to the abolition movement, for example, were Christians who could easily appeal to Scripture to support the institution of slavery.
    - It may be too big a question for this lesson, but it seems that we at least need to raise it: Are there places we may risk blinding ourselves to God’s work through stubborn commitment to our interpretation of Scripture? How would we know when our interpretation of Scripture needs reconsideration?

Jesus’s care for the blind man (and the contrast with the religious leaders’ treatment of the man) sets the stage for Jesus’s next claim: “I am the good shepherd” (10:11).

- In Ezekiel 34, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy against the “shepherds of Israel” who have slaughtered the sheep for their own profit while neglecting the weak, sick, and lost sheep (34:1-6). It’s not hard to apply the prophesy to the religious leaders in John 9 and their treatment of the man born blind.
- In response, God condemns the shepherds of Israel and promises the he himself will act as Israel’s shepherd, searching for the lost sheep, feeding them with good pasture, and binding up the injured (34:11-16). He also promises to send his servant David (the Messiah) to feed the sheep and be their shepherd (34:23-24).
- When Jesus claims, “I am the good shepherd,” he’s likely drawing on traditions like these to identify himself as the Messiah and to associate himself with God the Father, the ultimate good shepherd. And he demonstrates how a good shepherd searches for his scattered sheep when he seeks out the blind man who’s been driven out of the synagogue.

So, how does this sign point us to God? What does the Son reveal about the Father?

- It’s best to let the class share their own insights, but here are some of my reflections.
  - The two “I am” statements that frame this sign (“I am the light of the world,” and “I am the good shepherd”) help to interpret the sign. God is the good shepherd who refuses to let his sheep remain lost and scattered in spiritual darkness. As light shines forth, so he seeks them out and scatters the darkness that confines them in blindness.
John 11 recounts the final miracle in the gospel (but not, in the end, the last sign; more on this next week). It offers maybe the greatest sign of Jesus’s life-giving power, but it also presents some abiding theological puzzles.

Jesus’s initial response to Mary and Martha’s request might strike us as odd, but it’s the kind of thing we’ve heard Jesus say before in the gospel of John.

- 11:4: “This illness . . . is for God’s glory so that God may be glorified through it.”
- 9:3: “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

These verses present a theological conundrum: does God cause blindness and illness (or even death) in order to bring himself glory?

- I think concluding that God causes these ailments for his own glory would be a misunderstanding. In John 9:3, Jesus seems more concerned to correct his disciples’ misperception that sin caused the blindness. And in both stories, the emphasis seems to be more that these ailments provide the opportunity for God’s revelation/glorification. However we sort out the theological conundrum, the beginning of the story reminds us of the purpose of the signs: to reveal the Father through the Son.

When we get past 11:4, however, we’re not done with conundrums. Jesus’s actions in 11:5 are equally puzzling.

- We’re told that Jesus loves Lazarus (11:3, 5), and yet he does not immediately respond to Mary and Martha’s message. Instead, he waits for two more days. Why?
- Does he resist traveling to Bethany because he’s worried about his opponents in Judea? His disciples seem to be thinking along these lines (11:8), but this does not appear to be Jesus’s concern.
- Does he wait so that Lazarus will die and then he can raise him from the dead and offer an even more impressive sign? It’s often interpreted this way, but letting one of his sheep suffer death so that he can have an opportunity to glorify himself doesn’t sound like the “Good Shepherd” to me. So, what’s going on?
  - This story presents a paradox worth remembering in times of doubt: God loves his children; sometimes God delays in responding to his children’s needs. We may not know why he delays, but this story affirms that a delay does not equal a loss of love.

Mary and Martha both struggle with this paradox.

- Both women make the same statement when they first encounter Jesus: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32). The statement expresses confidence in Jesus’s ability to heal, but it also expresses a complaint: “If you had been here . . . but you weren’t. Why?”
  - Note that the other onlookers express a similar confusion: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (11:37).
- Can you think of times you’ve wanted to say, “Lord, if you had been here . . .”? 
  - Are there times you prayed to God without a response? Did it lead you to question his love?

Jesus’s encounter with Martha involves a misunderstanding that results in a paradigmatic confession.

- Jesus tells her that her brother will rise again, and she affirms her belief in the general resurrection of the dead in the last days (11:23-24).
  - It’s hard to know her tone of voice, but I hear her saying, “Yeah, thanks, Jesus. I know he’s going to rise at the resurrection, but that doesn’t help right now. Right now, he’s dead, and he wouldn’t be if you had gotten here sooner.” Knowledge that we will meet our dead
loved ones again at the resurrection offers no little comfort during grieving, but it can also be a shallow comfort during the fresh pain of loss.

- Jesus responds, in essence, “You don’t understand; I’m bringing life now.”
  - The dead will live again (11:25b); but maybe even more importantly, belief in Jesus brings eternal life in the present (11:26).
    - In case we’ve forgotten, remember John 17:3 one more time. Eternal, abundant life comes from knowing God. So, believing that Jesus is the Son who reveals the Father connects us to the conduit for abundant life.
  - This might be the main point of the sign. Jesus demonstrates his power by raising the dead, but he also reveals that he is the source of real life for those who are still breathing.
- Martha’s confession in 11:27 represents the belief that John hopes to bring about in all of his readers. This is why he chooses to recount these signs (20:30-31).

Jesus’s encounter with Mary re-affirms one of the abiding messages of the story: delay does not equal a loss of love.

- When Jesus hears Mary’s “complaint” and sees her grief, he is deeply moved (11:32-22).
  - Much ink has been spilled trying to explain Jesus’s emotional response in these verses.
    - He is “greatly disturbed” and “deeply moved” (11:33); he weeps (11:35), and he is “greatly disturbed” again (11:38).
  - The main options are:
    - He is grieving, either for (1) the loss of a beloved friend and the suffering of his family, (2) human sin which causes suffering and death, or (3) the lack of human faith that he can raise Lazarus.
    - He is angry, because of the unbelief of the mourners.
  - What do you think?
- John’s repeated reminders of Jesus’s love for Lazarus (11:3, 5, 11, 36) help us interpret Jesus’s emotional response. Jesus’s strong emotions offer an outward expression of his deep love for Lazarus and his grieving family. Lazarus is dead because he delayed, and he knows that he will raise him from the dead in a few moments (he’s been hinting that this is what he plans to do throughout the whole story); nevertheless, the suffering of his sheep disturbs him greatly and moves him to tears because of his great love for them.

The story ends with the sign and the crowd’s response.

- In ways that foreshadow his own resurrection (notice the stone), Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb and back to life.
  - His movement out of the literal death and darkness of the tomb symbolizes our own transition from spiritual death and darkness when we turn to recognize Jesus as the light of the world.
- As we’ve seen before, some respond to the sign with belief (11:45); others do not (11:46-48).

So, how does this sign point us to God? What does the Son reveal about the Father?

- It’s best to let the class share their own insights, but here are some of my reflections.
  - This sign obviously reveals God as the one who gives and sustains life, a message we’ve encountered in other signs already (for example, the healing of the official’s son), but I wonder if this sign doesn’t introduce a new wrinkle. Jesus’s delay leads to confusion, frustration, and even anger for Lazarus’s family. Mary and Martha believe Jesus can heal, and they’ve remained faithful to him. Why, then, does he let Lazarus die? Doubtlessly, John’s audience has experienced similar frustration and confusion. So have we. Why does God delay and what does that mean? This sign does not attempt to resolve the conundrum, but it strongly asserts that any such delay does not indicate a lack of love. When Jesus weeps for Lazarus and his family, we see a God who deeply loves his children in the midst of their suffering.
The so-called “Book of Signs” in John’s gospel ends in John 12, and the “Book of Glory,” which recounts the last week of Jesus’s life, begins in John 13. The last miracle in John’s Gospel, therefore, is the raising of Lazarus in John 11. It’s a fitting final sign, but John has been building toward an even greater “sign” throughout the gospel.

- You might remember (or review) our discussion of “the hour” in John’s gospel. At the first sign, Jesus demurs when his mother asks him to help at the wedding party because, he says, “My hour has not yet come” (2:4). At other points in the narrative, John reminds us that “the hour” has not yet come (e.g., 7:30, 8:20). John tells his reader that we’re moving toward “the hour,” and at the end of the Book of Signs it appears we have arrived (12:27). The beginning of the Book of Glory confirms it: “Jesus knew that his hour had come” (13:1). Jesus himself announces that the hour has arrived with some of his last words before he is arrested (17:1).

- In 17:1, Jesus connects “the hour” to the glorification of the Son and Father. So, what is “the hour” of the Son’s (and, thereby, the Father’s) glorification?
  - A recurring play on words in John’s gospel drives home the point. In different places, Jesus talks about being “lifted up” (3:13-14; 8:28-29; 12:32-33). Being “lifted up” might refer to his exaltation, or it might refer to his crucifixion when he will be “lifted up” on the cross. Or, it might mean both. John emphasizes with this play on words that Jesus’s crucifixion is his exaltation. It’s “the hour” when people will finally recognize his true identity (8:28-29). It’s “the hour” when he will draw all people to himself (12:32-33) and heal them like the serpent in the wilderness (3:14; cf. Num 21:4-9). In short, it’s the hour the Son will complete his mission to bring life by revealing the invisible Father (1:18).
  - John thus refers to the crucifixion as Jesus’s glorification (17:1-5). Jesus is glorified through the crucifixion because in that hour he perfectly completes his work as the Son. God is glorified through the crucifixion because in that hour he will be revealed more clearly (through the actions of his Son) than even before.

So, what does the “sign” of the crucifixion reveal?

- John inserts several details into his account of the crucifixion to draw symbolic connections between Jesus and the Passover Lamb.
  - In John 19:14, John carefully notes that Jesus is condemned by Pilate at the sixth hour on the day of Preparation for the Passover, the very same time when Passover lambs were slaughtered.
  - In 19:26, the soldiers use a hyssop branch to lift a wine-soaked sponge to Jesus. The hyssop branch was used in religious rituals, specifically rituals connected to Passover. In Exodus 12:22, we read that the Israelites use hyssop branches to paint the lambs’ blood on their doorposts on the night of the Passover.
  - In 19:33-36, the soldiers plan to break Jesus’s legs so that he will die more quickly, but they find that he has already died. John notes that this happened to fulfill the scripture, “None of his bones shall be broken.” The quotation comes from Exodus 12:46, where it refers to the Passover lamb.

- This symbolic emphasis in the crucifixion fulfills John the Baptist’s identification of Jesus in the opening chapter of the gospel. When he sees Jesus for the first time, he declares, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29); and he repeats his claim the next day with his disciples (1:36).

At one level, then, John’s account of the crucifixion reveals Jesus as the Lamb, the one whose blood means life and deliverance for God’s people.

- This is an important identification, but it only gets us to the first level. Remember, in John’s gospel, Jesus’s words and actions point to the Father because the Son only does and says what the Father does and says.
John’s pushing us to contemplate an even bigger question: what does the crucifixion reveal about the Father? What does it mean for God to reveal himself most clearly through the horrifying shame of the cross?

- Some early Christian groups struggled with this concept. We have gnostic Christian documents, for example, that imagine Christ as somehow slipping away at the last minute and having someone else die in his place. The early Christian theologian Irenaeus tells about a gnostic teacher named Cerinthus who claimed that the divine being (Christ) departed from the human being (Jesus) just before the crucifixion. So, a human suffered the crucifixion, but God did not; indeed, he could not because gods, by definition, cannot suffer.
- What does it mean for us that orthodox Christians rejected this gnostic teaching as heresy? The idea of a suffering God is certainly hard to fathom. It was an offense to Jews and foolishness to Greeks (to quote Paul). So, why hold on to this belief so firmly?

This is probably a good question to let the classes struggle with for a little while. For what it’s worth, here are some of my reflections.

- The cross reveals that God, in his very being, is self-giving, self-sacrificing love. The cross does not show us something that God does one time before returning to his more godly ways. God has been engaged in self-giving, self-sacrificing love since before time began, and he will continue long after this world ends because that’s who he is in his very essence. The Son reveals nothing more clearly than that. And the Son’s promise to abide in us if we abide in him (John 15:4ff.) is the Father’s invitation to join him in a relationship of self-giving love. Can we let go of all that we cling to in order to join the Father and Son in this relationship of eternal giving and receiving? If we can, we will have found abundant, eternal life.

If time permits, allow the class to reflect on things we’ve talked about over the course of the series.

- What did the Son show you about the Father through the signs in John?
- What truths about the Father did it affirm?
- Did you learn something new, or see something familiar in a new way?