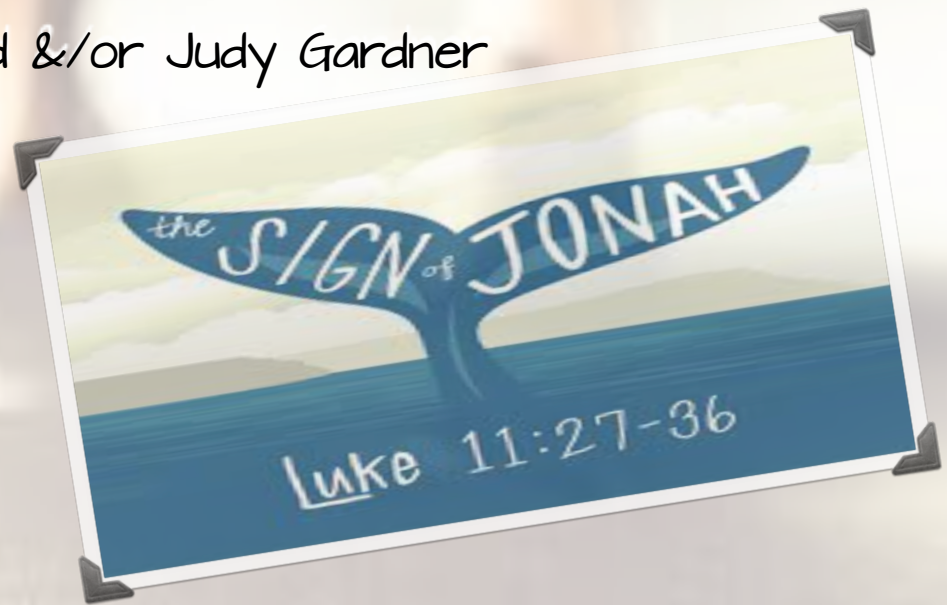


July 8-12, 2024 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 132
Jesus And The Sign Of Jonah

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;D) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we are going to pick up the chronological story of Jesus' life with 3 seemingly unrelated stories that Jesus tells in Matthew chapter 12 but before we dive into that I think it might be a good idea to really quick look back at what we talked about last weekend at Riverside- the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and the unforgivable sin.

This story is part of a series of stories that Matthew tells about several interactions Jesus has with people and their response to Him. Matthew chapter 12 begins with the Pharisees following Jesus around trying to catch Him doing something they can charge Him with. They scold Him for allowing His disciples to pick grain and eat it on the Sabbath. They scold Jesus for healing a man's hand on the Sabbath. They see Jesus cast a demon out of a man and even that doesn't impress them:

Then a demon-possessed man, who was blind and couldn't speak, was brought to Jesus. He healed the man so that he could both speak and see. The crowd was amazed and asked, "Could it be that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah?" But when the Pharisees heard about the miracle, they said, "No wonder he can cast out demons. He gets his power from Satan, the prince of demons." Matthew 12:22-24 (NLT)

Jesus doesn't think much of their argument. It just didn't make any sense and He points out the flaw in their logic:

Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? Matthew 12:25-26 (NIV)

And if it wasn't bad enough that their logic was ridiculous there was a much bigger problem:

So I tell you, people can be forgiven for every sin they do. And people can be forgiven for every bad thing they say. But if anyone speaks against the Holy Spirit, then he will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come. Matthew 12:31-32 (NLT)

Ever hear about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit or the unforgivable sin? I imagine you have if you grew up going to church. They were phrases that struck fear in the hearts of many of us (myself included). I spent an awful lot of my earlier years worrying that I might have accidentally blasphemed the Holy Spirit and thereby committed the unforgivable sin. I had this idea that the unforgivable sin was something a person couldn't come back from- that once a person committed that sin they were out and there was nothing they could ever do to be forgiven.

I don't think that anymore. It just doesn't make sense. Throughout the Bible we are shown that there's no sin so great that God can't forgive it. I once heard someone say, how far can the Grace of God NOT go? I like that. I believe the testimony of the Bible is that no sin is so great that Jesus' Grace can't save you from it. There are example after example of murderers, adulterers, liars, cheaters and every other sin you can think of being forgiven. So what is it that makes the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit a sin that "will never be forgiven, either in this world or the world to come"?

I think (and that's all this is- educated conjecture so take everything I say with a grain of salt) that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit occurs when we reject the leading of the Holy Spirit. Jesus explains what the Holy Spirit would do for believers:

And when he has come he will convince the world of its sin, and of the availability of God's goodness, and of deliverance from judgment... When the Holy Spirit, who is truth, comes, he shall guide you into all truth. John 16:8-13 (TLB)

Did you catch the problem? If the Holy Spirit is the one that convinces us of our sin- where we're going wrong- and guides us into all truth then what happens if we block the working of the Holy Spirit? We never repent and therefore there is no forgiveness. That makes (in my way of thinking at least) the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit a sin with eternal consequences.

If you're curious about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit you can go to the website or the Riverside app and listen to last week's lesson to your hearts content. What I think is important- and the reason I wanted to at least summarize all of this before we dive into the sign of Jonah- is because what happens next in Matthew chapter 12 makes much more sense when we remember that this is an ongoing story and the Pharisees who will be challenging Jesus in this week's reflections are the same guys that have been following Him around for weeks trying to get Him in trouble.

This is a troubling and confusing story for a lot of people. Maybe spend some time today reflecting on why the Pharisees were so blind to Jesus' claims and how we can welcome and work with the Holy Spirit in our own lives.

Tuesday Reflection: This week we'll be looking at what Jesus said to a group of Pharisees who had been hounding Him and following Him around and trying to catch Him doing something wrong. He has already unloaded on them with the whole blasphemy-of-the-Holy-Spirit remark after they poopooed the report that Jesus cast a demon out of a man (I've always wanted to include the word "poopooed" in a reflection and I'm pretty sure this was a first for me ;o). After Jesus had cast the demon out the Pharisees said He could only cast out demons because He was working with the power of Satan. That brings us to this week's story and look who's at it again:

One day some teachers of religious law and Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign to prove your authority." Matthew 12:38 (NLT)

What are these guys up to? Jesus performs a miraculous sign by exorcising a demon and the Pharisees explain it away as the work of Satan. Now they come to Jesus and ask Him to perform another sign to prove His authority. Was there could be anything that Jesus could do that would convince them? I doubt it. And that's what I think Jesus was getting at with the blasphemy-of-the-Holy-Spirit remark- if they reject the work of the Spirit there is nothing that will convince them that Jesus is the Messiah. Now they're asking for another sign. They're fishing. They're trying anything and everything to try to trip Jesus up and nothing will convince them that He is who He claims to be.

But like I said last week- I don't think it meant they could never come back from that sin. It only meant that as long as they rejected the work of the Spirit they would never come to repentance and accept Jesus for who He is and that means they cut themselves off from the

forgiveness that Jesus alone can deliver. I think last week I used the apostle Paul as an example of why I don't believe the blasphemy-of-the-Holy-Spirit is something that one could never recover from. I mean think about it- before Paul is Paul he was Saul. Saul was the most zealous opponent of the fledgling Christian Church. He was responsible for the deaths of Christians starting with Stephen in Acts chapter 7. But when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus Saul repented and became Paul- one of the most impactful Christian lives that was ever lived. At one point Paul is explaining what happened when Jesus blindsided him on the road to Damascus. Paul says that he was blinded by a bright light and then:

We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' " 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. Acts 26:14-15 (NLT)

Paul tells his conversion story several times in the book of Acts to various people but in Acts chapter 26 he gives a detail he left out of every other account- the goads. He mentions here that Jesus tells him, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." What's the deal with the goads? What is Jesus talking about?

He was talking about an ox goad. What's an ox goad? I'm glad you asked. A goad was an instrument that a farmer used to get a stubborn ox moving when it had decided to stop listening to him. It was a long stick with sharp spikes at the end and it was the only thing that would get an ox's attention. It wasn't that dangerous to the ox- it just made the ox uncomfortable. Ok, very uncomfortable but still, uncomfortable.

If an ox decided it wasn't going to listen to it's master anymore you could beat that ox almost to death and it wouldn't care. It wouldn't budge. But (and as a friend of mine likes to say, this is a VERY big but) if you took an ox goad and simply tapped the ox on the ankle (the only place that wasn't covered by muscle), why suddenly that ox would have a change of heart and start moving again. The farmer didn't need to make the ox bleed- he just needed to properly motivate the ox in the only way that ox would understand.

So who do you imagine Saul/Paul is in this analogy? You guessed it, he's the ox. When Jesus tells Saul/Paul that it's "hard" to kick-against-the-goads I think that means that the Holy Spirit had been trying to work on Saul but was prevented from making any headway because Paul was blaspheming the Holy Spirit. He was ignoring the leading and guidance of the Spirit that was trying to convict Saul of his sin and convince Saul that Jesus was who He claimed to be. Saul wasn't going to listen because there's no way that could be true, could it?

Saul did what many of us do- he had found a plot of religious real estate and decided he would never budge from it no matter what. The Spirit was working on him the same way a farmer works on a stubborn ox and Saul was feeling it but still wouldn't budge. It wasn't until Saul actually met Jesus that he realized he was wrong. And what did Saul do? He repented. He accepted the discipline and guidance of the Spirit of God and the rest is history.

So that brings us back to, well, us. I know in the past I've been guilty of finding a patch of religious real estate that I was so committed to I ended up ignoring the guidance of the Holy Spirit and I can kind of relate to Jesus' statement, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads"- how about you? How can we be sure we never shut ourselves off to the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

Wednesday Reflection: This week we're looking at the final part of Matthew chapter 12- a chapter where Matthew highlights the persistence of the Pharisees hounding Jesus and trying to catch Him doing something wrong. After ignoring His miraculous healing of a man who couldn't see or talk by casting out a demon they came at Jesus again:

One day some teachers of religious law and Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign to prove your authority." Matthew 12:38 (NLT)

Obviously they didn't really want to see a sign from Jesus- they were just continuing to harass Him and you can tell Jesus is starting to get irritated with them:

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. Matthew 12:39 (NIV)

This fascinates me. Jesus basically says, I won't give you a sign but you will get a sign- the sign of the prophet Jonah. What is Jesus doing? Well first He's telling them that He's not a circus performer or novelty act and He won't let them turn His ministry into a farce. But secondly I think He's telling them they're going to get an "anti-sign". What they're looking for is something really impressive to display the Messiah's power and strength which would signal success. Jesus flatly refuses to show them what they are looking for. Instead He tells them the only sign they'll get is the sign of Jonah. But what is the sign of Jonah?

Well if you've read the book of Jonah and know his story then you might be shocked that Jesus is comparing Himself to Jonah who is one of top two or three most unlikeable Old Testament antiheroes (Jacob still is the reigning undefeated champion of unlikeability in my book but that's probably because we don't have much information about Jonah) but that's not what Jesus is doing. We'll get to what He is doing in a minute but first let's look at who Jonah was.

He was a prophet in Israel and Jewish tradition claims that he is the son of the widow of Zarepheth- a young boy that the prophet Elijah brings back from the dead in 1 Kings chapter 17. According to the legend the boy grows up and becomes a prophet of Yahweh. At some point in Jonah's life Yahweh tells him to go preach to Nineveh. Jonah is let the Ninevites know that if they don't repent they will be destroyed for their great sin. But Jonah doesn't want to go. He hates the Assyrians- who were the world power at that point. He doesn't want the Assyrians to repent and be saved- Jonah wants them destroyed.

So Jonah makes a run for it. He gets on a boat that is heading to Tarshish (which was in Spain). Tarshish is the opposite direction from Nineveh and Jonah thinks he's going to outrun Yahweh. But he doesn't. God sends a storm and to make a long story short, Jonah tells the sailors to toss him overboard and that then the storm will cease and the ship will be saved. Turns out Jonah would rather be dead than go and preach to the Assyrians. Most of us know what happens next- God does indeed still the storm that Jonah caused and He sends a giant fish to swallow Jonah so that Jonah won't die in the ocean. Jonah spends three days in the belly of the great fish and finally repents and God forgives him. Next the great fish vomits Jonah up onto the shore (which sounds gross but when you think about it it's really the lesser of two evils when it comes to getting out of the great fish ;o)

What does that have to do with our reflection for today? Well I think it might help us better understand what Jesus means by the sign-of-Jonah. He tells the Pharisees the only sign they'll get (and I don't think Jesus is saying He's giving them this sign but it's a sign they'll arrange themselves- more on that in a minute) is the sign of Jonah. Then He says this:

For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.

Matthew 12:40 (NLT)

What is the sign-of-Jonah Jesus is referring to? It's the fact that Jesus will be swallowed up by death in much the same way Jonah was swallowed up by the great fish. Then, like Jonah spent 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the great fish, Jesus will spend 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the earth. That's the sign-of-Jonah but let's finish by getting back to what I said earlier about Jesus not giving the Pharisees this sign but rather the Pharisees would bring this sign about on their own. How would they do that?

By killing Jesus. It would be the religious elite of Israel that would be responsible (along with the Romans help) for killing Jesus. Jesus knows that's what's coming and even as He refuses to give them the sign they keep asking for it's almost like He stops Himself and says, oh wait a minute. You know what? You will be receiving a sign but I'm not the one who will be giving it to you- it will be a result of something you do to me.

We'll spend some more time looking at the sign of Jonah tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on the fact that this is the first allusion to Jesus' death, burial and resurrection in the chronological story of His life. It's the first time He mentions it and while His mentioning of it is vague, it's there. We've just witnessed together the first time Jesus hints at what His ultimate mission is about. I think that's pretty cool.

Thursday Reflection: Yesterday we talked about the sign-of-Jonah and what Jesus meant by that (if you don't know what I mean go back and read yesterday's reflection- go ahead- we'll wait). Today we're going to look at Jesus' continuing words to the Pharisees about just how far from the heart of Yahweh they had strayed. He tells the Pharisees (who asked Him to prove He was who He claimed to be by showing them an impressive miracle) that the only sign they will get is the sign-of-Jonah. Then He goes on dressing them down:

The people of Nineveh will stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for they repented of their sins at the preaching of Jonah. Now someone greater than Jonah is here-but you refuse to repent. Matthew 12:41 (NLT)

Why will the people of Nineveh condemn the leaders of Israel? Because they weren't as open to the voice of God as the people of Nineveh. Think about it for a minute- Yahweh sends Jonah to preach to the Assyrians and after some "mild" convincing Jonah goes:

On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!" The people of Nineveh believed God's message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow. Jonah 3:4-5 (NLT)

Turns out this is the reason Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh and preach to them- he knew that if they repented Yahweh would forgive them and Jonah did NOT want that. But Jonah

did what Yahweh asked and now the Assyrians were repenting. The rest of the book of Jonah highlights how upset Jonah is (pouting would probably be a better description) and he asks God to kill him because he'd rather be dead than live in a world where Yahweh cared as much about a bunch of dirty Gentiles as He does about the Jews.

So would the Pharisees. Turns out the Pharisees were Jonah's spiritual descendants but they had no idea. Jesus tells them that Nineveh will judge them at the last day because the people of Nineveh repented after Jonah's half hearted eight word sermon (with no miraculous signs to back up his message) but the Pharisees have seen sign after sign after sign and they continue to actively disbelieve. They have every reason to believe but they choose to reject Jesus because He doesn't line up with their idea of what a Messiah is supposed to be and do.

The Pharisees expected the Messiah to be a military and political King who would drive the Romans out of Israel and establish Yahweh's throne and kingdom which would last for eternity. We've talked many times about how the people of Israel separated the Messianic prophecies into two basic categories- the conquering king who would defeat God's enemies and reign for eternity and the suffering servant whose sacrificial death would bring about the healing of the nations. Because of that the Rabbis believed there would be at least 2 (and possibly more) different people who would fulfill the prophecies.

But what the Rabbis didn't know was that Jesus would indeed fulfill all the prophecies Himself. It's just that the conquering King prophecies He fulfilled in the spiritual realms and the suffering servant prophecies He fulfilled in the physical realm. At least the first time He came that was true. Jesus says that one day He will return again and this time it will be as the conquering King who will indeed conquer Yahweh's enemies and establish God's kingdom and throne upon which He will reign for eternity. Even during His trial Jesus reiterated this:

Then Pilate went back into his headquarters and called for Jesus to be brought to him. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asked him... Jesus answered, "My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world." John 19:33-36 (NLT)

It turns out that if we're looking for a sign that proves that Jesus is who He claimed to be this is it- the sign-of-Jonah- three days in the belly of the earth after which He would emerge victorious from the tomb. Oh yeah, there's another similarity between Jonah and Jesus- Jonah's preaching led to the repentance of countless gentiles. So did Jesus'.

Friday Reflection: This week we're looking at Jesus' response to the Pharisees when they asked Him for a miraculous sign right after they rejected the miraculous sign He had just performed (casting a demon out of a man). They really weren't looking for another sign- if that's what they needed to believe in Jesus they would have had more than enough to pick from. Some scholars believe that the miracles that are recorded in the gospels are only the tip of the ice berg. That Jesus healed just about everyone in that region of the world and that His miraculous signs would have been too many to count. The Pharisees weren't truly looking for a reason to believe- they were just harassing Him trying to trip Him up and catch Him doing something that would allow them to accuse Him.

So Jesus tells them the only sign they will receive is the sign-of-Jonah. We discussed what that sign is the last two days but after Jesus' remarks on the sign-of-Jonah Matthew tells two more stories in chapter 12 that I never thought went together with the sign-of-Jonah remark. But now I do. Here's the first story which is really more of a parable I guess:

When an evil spirit leaves a person, it goes into the desert, seeking rest but finding none. Then it says, 'I will return to the person I came from.' So it returns and finds its former home empty, swept, and in order. Then the spirit finds seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they all enter the person and live there. And so that person is worse off than before. That will be the experience of this evil generation. Matthew 12:43-45 (NLT)

Do you see the connection to Matthew's story about the whole sign-of-Jonah clash with the Pharisees? It's in that last line- Jesus once again mentions this "evil generation". He said almost exactly the same thing when the Pharisees ask Him to show them a sign. So how does this story about a haunted house (or in this case a haunted person) fit in with the sign of Jonah?

I think (and again- this is me surmising and you should take this with another grain of salt because this is just an educated surmisal [I think I just made that word up but I like it] that occurred to me when I was preparing for this weekend's lesson) that Jesus is telling the Pharisees (this evil generation) that He's getting ready to cleanse their world of evil but that after that how the Pharisees respond is up to them. He warns that if they don't fill up the void that will exist after His death/burial/resurrection/ascension with something new then they will end up worse off than they were before Jesus did His miraculous work.

The same thing is true for us but in a different way. If you ever go to an AA meeting and listen to people who are attempting to recover their lives you'll hear a very similar sentiment from recovering addicts. I've dealt with a lot of addicts over the years- myself included- and I've noticed something I think is pretty important. You can't recover your life from addiction by simply saying no to your drug of choice. That's an important first step but if you don't fill up the empty space left when you evict your addiction with something else- something positive- then you'll end up worse off than you were before you tried to get clean. I've seen it over and over and over. It's what I realized was missing from my attempts to recover my life when I was 20 years old.

I had tried over and over to leave drugs and alcohol in my past but every time I failed miserably. At one point I was reading Psalm chapter 1 and I realized what I had been doing wrong:

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the Lord's teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. Psalm 1:3 (NCV)

Do you see what was missing from my recovery plan? All I was thinking I had to do was stop doing the damaging stuff. The stuff that was slowly killing me and all of my relationships. But I was wrong. I read Psalm chapter 1 and realized what I was missing. I was trying to stop doing the damaging stuff but I wanted to keep living my life exactly the same as I had been living it for the last 3 years. But the Psalm is very clear about what brings success in this life

particularly when it comes to leaving behind bad habits that I was trying to change. I had been trying to change my life while I continued to listen to who/what I had always listened to, go where I'd always gone and do what I'd always done.

But just changing who/what I listened to, where I went and what I did wasn't the only strategy I had been missing in my recovery plan. The Psalm goes on and says the "happy" people are the ones who love the Lord's teachings and think (meditate or reflect) on those teachings day and night. I have to admit this sounded like homework to me but I was desperate and willing to try anything if it would save my life so I got out my old Bible that was given to me when I was 13 and started trying to figure out what Jesus wanted from me.

And guess what? That was the missing part of my recovery. Being careful about who/what I listened to, where I went and what I did with the added resource of reflecting on God's words to try and decipher what His plan for me was. I won't say it was easy after I figured out these missing components but my recovery from that point in time was life changing and real. And after 38 years of doing my best to live my life according to Psalm chapter 1 (sometimes doing a much better job of it than others) I can tell you this- David was right. I became happier, stronger and more successful (the three promises for those who are careful about who/what they listen to, where they go and what they do). I mean think about it- happy, strong and successful. Is there anything else you want out of life?

I think Jesus' warning with the haunted house parable is just as applicable to our lives as it was to the Pharisees. Jesus can empty out your life of the negative influences but unless we fill our lives up with positive influences we'll end up right back where we began- and worse. But here's what fascinates me with how Matthew ends this section of his gospel- he connects this idea with something else that happens while Jesus is dealing with these unbelieving and antagonistic Pharisees. Turns out Jesus has another group of skeptics to deal with- His family:

As Jesus was speaking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. Someone told Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak to you." Jesus asked, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then he pointed to his disciples and said, "Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!" Matthew 12:46-50 (NLT)

Sounds kind of harsh for Jesus to say that in front of His mom but if you read Mark's account of this story we learn a significant detail:

One time Jesus entered a house, and the crowds began to gather again. Soon he and his disciples couldn't even find time to eat. When his family heard what was happening, they tried to take him away. "He's out of his mind," they said. Mark 3:20-21 (NLT)

That had to sting. Even His own mom was having trouble believing He knew what He was doing. But that's not why I think this story in Matthew's gospel was intended to go along with the sign-of-Jonah and the parable of the haunted house/life. The connection for me in this story is the fact that we see Jesus in a house filled with people whose only motive is to listen to Him and try to do what He taught them to do. He talks in the parable of the haunted house/life about the dangers of an empty house and now here He is filling up a house with people who are looking for the new life that only He could give.

He's still filling up that house. He's still calling anyone who will listen to join Him in changing the world. Not by looking for a powerful or miraculous sign- but by entrusting our lives to Him and asking Him to show us the way. Even when that way doesn't make sense to us.

The story of Mary and Jesus' brothers doubting Him is a strange story and it seems strange to me that Mary could have had her doubts considering all she went through with His birth (Jesus' brothers never believed that He was who He claimed to be while He was alive) but here's something that is very cool- after His death/burial/resurrection/ascension when the disciples who still believed Jesus' message were all together awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit Luke tells us this:

When they arrived, they went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying... They all met together and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus. Acts 1:13-14 (NLT)

They may have had a tough time seeing who Jesus is while He walked this earth as their brother but now everyone is in the house together. That house in Acts chapter 1 was full of people who just wanted to follow Jesus and see what was next for them and the world- no matter where that led. And Mary was there too. So were Jesus' brothers. I guess that means it's never too late to begin with Jesus. We just have to be careful to fill our own lives/house with Jesus and the scriptures. Oh yeah, and don't forget to be careful about who/what you listen to, where you go and what you do. If you do that there's no limit to what Jesus can do through your transformed life.