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Matthew 16:1–4. NLT

One day the Pharisees and Sadducees came to test Jesus, demanding that he show them a miraculous sign from heaven to prove his authority.

² He replied, “You know the saying, ‘Red sky at night means fair weather tomorrow; ³ red sky in the morning means foul weather all day.’ You know how to interpret the weather signs in the sky, but you don’t know how to interpret the signs of the times! ⁴ Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign, but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah.” Then Jesus left them and went away.

Luke 12:49-59. NLT

⁴⁹ “I have come to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already burning! ⁵⁰ I have a terrible baptism of suffering ahead of me, and I am under a heavy burden until it is accomplished. ⁵¹ Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I have come to divide people against each other! ⁵² From now on families will be split apart, three in favor of me, and two against—or two in favor and three against.

*⁵³ ‘Father will be divided against son
and son against father;
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother;
and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.’”*

⁵⁴ Then Jesus turned to the crowd and said, “When you see clouds beginning to form in the west, you say, ‘Here comes a shower.’ And you are right. ⁵⁵ When the south wind blows, you say, ‘Today will be a scorcher.’ And it is. ⁵⁶ You fools! You know how to interpret the weather signs of the earth and sky, but you don’t know how to interpret the present times.

⁵⁷ “Why can’t you decide for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ When you are on the way to court with your accuser, try to settle the matter before you get there.

Otherwise, your accuser may drag you before the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, who will throw you into prison. ⁵⁹ And if that happens, you won't be free again until you have paid the very last penny."

Sarcasm and red skies.

When I was working on my Ph.D. in Computer Science at the University of Southern California, I had to show proficiency in another language. The only foreign language I had any understanding of was French, because both of my parents spoke it. My mother was very fluent. My father was pretty good with it, but he was stronger with Spanish and Portuguese. Mind you, he barely finished high school, and he was a retired Marine who sold tires and worked on cars for a living, but he picked languages up easily. When it came time for me to take my French exam, I was told in advance I would have to translate two pages out of a book that was given to me. It was a French textbook on computer hardware, a massive volume of about a thousand pages. I had a week to prepare. On the day of the exam, I would show up and a French professor would pick two pages for me to translate. In a panic, I drove to my parents' home to get my mother's help deciphering the book. But she wasn't at home. My father insisted on helping me, and he was a bit miffed when I questioned his French proficiency. What he did was take the book from me and page through it for about five minutes. Then he

handed it back to me. I can tell you exactly what two pages they will tell you to translate, he said with confidence. Just translate and memorize these two pages.

I'll get back to my father. There are a couple of interesting things about our first Bible passage today. One of them has to do with the biblical meaning of it and the second is something intriguing about the example Jesus chooses to use. There's a third point I would like to discuss, and that has to do with this bit of wisdom offered to me by my father. Let's deal with the first two points first.

The passage opens with the high-ranking Jewish rabbis demanding that Jesus provide some miraculous sign in order to prove that he is indeed the Son of God and the Messiah that was promised long ago. Before I even get to the first two points, though, I want to point out a little language trick that isn't apparent when you read this in English. The Greek word that is used for "heaven" in the first verse is *ouranos*. It means both Heaven and sky, and so the use of it here is a pun on the part of the author, Matthew. The Pharisees and Sadducees are asking for a sign from Heaven, but Jesus is about to give them a sign about the sky.

Jesus gives his questioners some weather prediction information that might be useful to fishermen and other people living off the land. He says that if there is a red sky in the evening, then there will be good weather the next day. But, if

there is a red sky in the morning, then they're in for bad weather all day. So, there's your miraculous sign, you idiots, Jesus is saying.

What does it mean, though, this red sky business? Let's consider the geography of the area. First of all, just to the west of where Jesus and his challengers are standing is the Mediterranean Sea. To the east is a vast desert. This causes a dramatic movement of air, with strong breezes crossing over the area. Wet air moves inland off the Sea and heads toward the desert. And, as it turns out, the land rises as one moves away from the Sea. That means that as the heavy, wet air moves east and upward, it cools quickly. This causes it to lose moisture. There is a tendency for rain to fall close to the Sea, with the likelihood of rain dropping off quickly as we move deeper into the desert. Importantly, Jesus was not located right near the sea; he was a little further inland. There is one more complication to the weather pattern in this area. There were times when the wind was reversed, and dry, hot winds would come downhill out of the desert, toward the Sea. This desert air would be filled with fine dust particles.

The truth is that a lot of people have had trouble interpreting this odd bit of weather wisdom, but here is a quick shot at making sense of it. If the wind is coming from the east in the morning, the dust particles would give the sky a

reddish color. These particles would also seed any clouds that might be overhead and cause rain. But if the sky was red in evening, it likely meant that the clouds were over the Sea, causing a red sunset. By the time these clouds moved inland, though, they would have already shed their water when they reached the place where Jesus and his doubters stood. So, a red sky in the morning when the sun could be seen up over the rise of the desert, meant that any clouds either overhead or to the west would be seeded and rain might result. But if the low, western evening sunset brought a red sky, the clouds were way over the Sea and the rain would not reach far enough inland, and so the day would be dry. In other words, to get rain, you need more than clouds coming in from over the ocean, you need some desert particulates in the air.

Jesus is mocking those who are doubting him. He says, hey, you want a sign? Here's how to predict the weather. I'm going to return to this. There's something significant about this passage that isn't obvious from reading it – and it relates to our second passage today. But first, the second point I want to discuss has to do with the biblical interpretation of this first passage. Before dismissing these people, Jesus says to them: *“Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign, but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah.”* The implication is, if you want more than weather advice, I'll

offer you this: the sign of the prophet Jonah. Out of context, it's not obvious what Jesus is talking about.

In the Old Testament, Jonah preached to the people of his day that they should repent. As it turned out, the inhabitants of Nineveh responded to his impassioned call and did indeed repent of their sins. So maybe Jesus is referring to this. Another explanation is that the sign of Jonah refers to Jesus' resurrection after being dead for three days. Remember that when God told Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach to the people there, he fled rather than take up the mission. Jonah thought the people there were so evil that God should just wipe them out. So, Jonah didn't want to bother with them. But after he fled on a ship, he was tossed overboard and swallowed by a sea creature. He was inside the fish's belly, seemingly dead, for three days. Perhaps Jesus was predicting his own apparent state of being dead for three days before miraculously coming back to the world of the living. The sign of Jonah would thus be a reference to the fact that Jesus would die and be resurrected.

In fact, if we look earlier in Matthew, we see that this second explanation is probably what Jesus was referring to. In Matthew 12:38-40 we read: ³⁸ *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.”

³⁹ But Jesus replied, “Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign; but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah.

⁴⁰ 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.”

During Lent, we anticipate the death and resurrection of Jesus, so it’s intriguing to look even further along in Matthew. After Jesus was crucified and died, the Pharisees came to Pilate. Very late in Matthew, in 27:62-66, we read:

⁶² The next day, on the Sabbath, the leading priests and Pharisees went to see Pilate.

⁶³ They told him, “Sir, we remember what that deceiver once said while he was still alive: ‘After three days I will rise from the dead.’ ⁶⁴ So we request that you seal the tomb until the third day. This will prevent his disciples from coming and stealing his body and then telling everyone he was raised from the dead! If that happens, we’ll be worse off than we were at first.” ⁶⁵ Pilate replied, “Take guards and secure it the best you can.” ⁶⁶ So they sealed the tomb and posted guards to protect it.

The leading priests and Pharisees seemed to be aware that Jesus might come back after three days. So, they must have understood Jesus’ reference to the sign of Jonah. Their fear was that Jesus would just pretend to die so they would take

him down from the cross, and then the followers of Jesus would take him out of the tomb alive after three days, or that he would die and the body would disappear.

In the passage about Jonah and in other passages in Matthew, Jesus predicts that he will indeed rise again after three days. Jesus' sarcasm about red skies and the sign of Jonah thus underscores more than just his determination to defy those who would doubt his identity. It gets to the core of what Lent is all about. Jesus died and came back to life as one last undeniable statement to us. He is the Messiah and he offers us forgiveness, regeneration, and salvation.

But let me return to this issue of Jesus' weather remarks. Let's consider our second passage for today. It's from the Gospel of Luke and it's similar in some respects. Jesus is saying two things here. First, that he will suffer terribly and that it is necessary. And second, there will be great division caused by him, because some will believe, and some will not believe. Even families will be split.

Then Jesus launches into another weather analogy. There are differences between this and the weather remark in Matthew. It's not so sharply sarcastic. Jesus sounds more frustrated than sarcastic. He's saying hey, you seem to worry about predicting the weather, but you aren't worried about predicting what's going to happen to your own souls. He goes on to say that the legal system was, at the time, brutal to people who did not pay their debts. They would be thrown into

prison for not paying off loans. The point is that they should expect equally harsh treatment from a God who disapproves of those who do not confront their guilt.

But wait. The bit about the weather. It's superficially similar to the material in Matthew. But this time, it's not so technical and inscrutable. Jesus says that if you see clouds coming in from the west, over the ocean, it's going to rain somewhere. There isn't any of the more complex argument about seeding clouds with desert dust. It just says that clouds lead to rain and desert air is hot. But here's the big point. It's not even worth trying to figure out if these two pieces of weather prediction advice coincide technically – *because the first passage probably was added to the Gospel of Matthew by scribes hundreds of years later, in Europe.*

As it turns out, verses 2 to 4, where the somewhat complex argument about red skies and weather is given, do not appear in many early manuscripts of Matthew. Many Bibles note that these phrases might have been added later, by European writers. Some translations omit these lines altogether. In fact, many scholars argue that this sort of complex technical argument about the weather doesn't mesh with near Eastern weather wisdom of the time, and in fact, it reads more like later European weather wisdom. This would explain why it is so hard to interpret: it might have nothing to do with true weather patterns in this region if it was added by someone who lived long afterward and far away. By the way, there

are a number of places in the Bible where it appears that bits of material were added by scribes copying scriptural manuscripts. If these lines about the weather were indeed not written by the author of the Gospel of Matthew, the passage should read: *One day the Pharisees and Sadducees came to test Jesus, demanding that he show them a miraculous sign from heaven to prove his authority.*

² He replied, "Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign, but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah." Then Jesus left them and went away.

In other words, Jesus might have given his doubters a quick, simple response and told them that they were evil for demanding a miracle, and that he would prove his identity by coming back to life after three days. Personally, I prefer a non-sarcastic Jesus that doesn't toss out inscrutable weather wisdom. In many ways, this Jesus reminds me a lot of my rock-solid father.

Remember my French exam and the thousand-page tome? You see, my father figured, quite accurately, that my French examiner would have zero knowledge of computer hardware. And as it turned out, the book consisted of dense, electrical engineering gibberish that the professor could not decipher - except for two pages in the middle of the book where there was a brief biography of the author. Your examiner will pick these two pages, my dad said. He was

right. We waited for my mother to come home and had her translate these two pages. When it came time for the test, the French professor picked up the book, stared at it for a bit, and then he handed it back to me, telling me what two pages to translate. He ended up incredibly impressed with my ability to translate so quickly and smoothly from French to English.

What's the lesson? My French professor was an extremely intelligent and educated person. But his expertise was not in engineering. Sometimes the Bible can seem to us like that huge textbook on computer hardware seemed to him. My father intuitively knew this, but it hadn't occurred to me. I was going to try to somehow read and translate the entire thing in a week. It's quite possible that there was some European monk who could have used my father's advice. Don't try and turn Jesus into some kind of weather engineer. Read the Bible for what it says to our hearts. The second weather quote we read, the one about rain clouds leading to rain and desert winds being hot, that's the real Jesus. His message to us is clear and simple. Live honorable lives. Be good to your fellow humans. Thank the Lord for the gifts we receive every day. Accept the hard times we all must face here on this planet. Admit our guilt when we do something wrong. Seek forgiveness. Let the grace of God regenerate our souls. Rise up from the death of sin. Enjoy a radiant life and know that someday we will live forever.