

John 4: 46-54  
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## Spectacular

Today marks a moment in American culture when we get to revel in the dual spectacles of the Winter Olympics and the Super Bowl. I'm guessing at least a few of us tuned in Friday night for the Opening Ceremonies in Italy. Maybe you have become an overnight curling expert or superfan of ice dancing. Whether or not you woke up early to watch Lindsey Vonn, I know you join me in praying for her full recovery. Many of us will tune in tonight, too, if not for the teams themselves, at least for the commercials and maybe the Puppy Bowl. It's hard not to be drawn in by the bigness of it all, the hype, the grand staging, the personalities, the drama, and the pomp, which means that we are not all that different from our ancestors. Human beings have been drawn to the spectacular since the dawn of time.

This morning's text from the gospel of John picks up shortly where Casey left off last week. Jesus returns to Cana, where—as John wants us to remember—Jesus performed his first sign when he changed water into wine at a wedding. He is greeted by a royal official who has walked twenty miles to seek Jesus out because he is desperate to find a way to save his son. He has heard about Jesus, about the other things he has said and done, and he hopes against hope that Jesus might be able to help him, too. And so, this man, with a fair amount of power and privilege swallows any pride he might have left and begs Jesus for help. And Jesus—the same Jesus who seemed to tell his mother to stay in her lane a few weeks back—makes a statement about only believing thanks to “signs and wonders.” *To be fair, Jesus, this man is not asking for*

*fireworks or a big to-do, he simply wants to save his son. And you don't sound all that pastoral, by the way.* The odd thing about Jesus' statement is that the "you" here is plural:

"Unless [y'all] see miraculous signs and wonders, [y'all] won't believe."<sup>1</sup>

While it may be true that the man may be coming to Jesus because he has heard about the big things Jesus has done, he is not alone. Others have done and will do the same, and Jesus has words for them and us. He is skeptical of everyone who comes to faith because they are awed by the spectacular. He knows—as we do, if we're honest—that a faith built on spectacles that cause us to ooh and ahh is not a faith that will sustain us for very long. As scholar Frederick Dale Bruner writes:

Signs-and-wonders faith has the innate danger of being sunshine faith, faith that believes when the going is good but that is gone when the going gets tough.<sup>2</sup>

It's almost as though Jesus breaks the fourth wall, like a character in *The Office*, and speaks directly to me or us even as he speaks to the man right in front of him. And if Jesus is right (and of course, Jesus is right), it isn't easy to hear. It can be difficult to be told the truth about ourselves. And yet, to his credit—like Jesus' mother a few chapters back—the official is not deterred. When Jesus finishes speaking, the man asks Jesus once again to come with him "before [his] son dies." There's a poignant tenacity to this man, this father. Jesus did not answer his question at first, and the man is determined to get an answer. And he does: "Go home; your son lives." The man believes we are told and takes Jesus at his word. And then he heads home.

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<sup>1</sup> John 4:48, CEB

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 289.

Twenty miles. Likely on foot. All the while wondering, hoping, trying his best to trust that Jesus' words are true.

Years ago, Eugene Peterson the Presbyterian pastor who gave us *The Message* translation, began his translation work by translating a selection of fifteen psalms. He compiled them into a book he entitled, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. The psalms he chose are the Psalms of Ascents, songs or prayers that have been read, spoken, and sung by pilgrims throughout the centuries as they make their way up to Jerusalem. He underscores that these songs are perfectly suited for between-the-times moments:

They are songs of transition, brief hymns that provide courage, support and inner direction for getting us to where God is leading us in Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

I struggle to imagine a more vivid between-the-times moment than this father's journey back to Capernaum. And yet this walk, this long obedience brilliantly mirrors the life of faith. Yes, the father receives confirmation and good news, the best news as he turns that final corner toward home. But it is that 20-mile stretch when he continues on, step by step, with only the promise of Jesus whispering in his ear that stops me in my tracks.

Because as I wrote in "The Banner" this past week, I want the big moments. In a world on fire, where neighbors turn on neighbors, where children wander alone and succumb to the deadly cold, where families hide in basements for fear of a knock on the door, I want halftime show worthy miracles and awe-inspiring, larger-than-life show-stoppers that bring an abrupt and decisive end to all that is wrong and all that is broken. And yet, it is not the spectacles that have carried me this far. And it wasn't the spectacles that sustained John's community either. As

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, Kindle p. 14.

they huddled together, unwelcome in their places of worship and uncertain about what horror the Roman Empire would fling their way next, they found themselves holding on to one another and to the Word God spoke in Jesus, the same Word who became flesh and lived among us, as one of us. This Jesus calls a skeptical Nathanel, banter with a confused Nicodemus, offers life-giving water and conversation to a Samaritan woman, and heals a royal official's young son from afar. This same Jesus will go on to do other spectacular things—feeding thousands and healing all sorts of human pain—and yet his most spectacular act of all will be his submission to a humiliating, horrific, and very human death that he in no way deserves. And he arrives there not by dodging the mundane but by seeking it out, seeking us out. He feeds people who are stomach-rumbling hungry, pays attention to the ones others choose to overlook or trample, debates and creates community with and listens to all types of people, and cries over the death of a friend. In other words, he lives a very human, everyday life. Step by step, day after day, Jesus embraces the everyday, between-the-times people he comes to save, not only with jaw-dropping miracles but also with persistent faithfulness and compassion, town by town, person by person. He engages people where they are because he longs for a relationship with them and with this world he and his Father so dearly love.

While I enjoy the wonder of the Olympics and the hoopla of the Super Bowl, spectacles like these are not what sustain me or give me hope for these between-the-times times. No, what gives me hope and strength is instead the steady faithfulness of everyday people who—like the royal official—walk the road of faith with the words of Jesus in their ears and hearts without knowing with absolute certainty that Jesus' promise is true. I am inspired by the people who deliver groceries to neighbors who are too afraid to leave their homes. I am inspired by

people who pray and stand up for strangers who do not look like them or speak like them or love like them or pray like them. I am inspired by volunteers who pack grocery bags for hungry families at Coltrane-Webb without fanfare in a corner of the Education building. I am inspired by children and young people who fill this place with energy, curiosity, wonder, and joy. I am inspired by people who read to other people's children and grandchildren here at First Kids and at Irvin Elementary. I am inspired by parents who get their children dressed and out the door on a Sunday morning, the one morning when they could sleep in or linger over another cup of coffee. I am inspired by older adults who remain inquisitive and invested in trying to love the world as God does, even though that same world has broken their hearts too many times to count. I am inspired by people who have heard the promise of Jesus and who continue to pray, hug, listen, give, lead, weep, volunteer, wrestle with scripture, teach, share, cook, sing, show up, and pray some more when this work is joyful and when it's hard. In other words, I am inspired by you and by all the everyday beloved ones who have nurtured and encouraged me in the life of faith. You are the ones who inspire me to keep trusting the promise of Jesus when I have miles to go before I can know with 100% certainty that his promise is true. That's what faith is after all, that is what believing means, taking Jesus at his word when the road is long and the end lies beyond our sight. The halftime shows and extravagantly choreographed ceremonies are not what sustain me or my faith. Our life together does. And when the show is over, when the heartbreak comes, when the road is long, I remain grateful, because by the grace of God, I have heard and believe Jesus' words **and** I am blessedly surrounded by ordinary, beloved, broken, spectacular human beings who have heard Jesus' promise, too, and who do not and will not leave me to walk the road of faith alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.