

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron,⁹ “When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Perform a miracle,’ then say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,’ and it will become a snake.”

¹⁰ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. ¹¹ Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: ¹² Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs. ¹³ Yet Pharaoh’s heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said. (Exodus 7:8-13)

What Do We Teach our Children?

Last week Sunday, we had our back to school barbeque. We had a bouncy obstacle course and instead of the usual hamburgers and hot dogs, we served ribs. We had a full parking lot and the worst of the rain held off until late in the day. By all accounts it was a fun time – and I missed it. We had to take our son to his first year of college. But I hope that all of you were there. So what was the point of all those fun and games? Certainly, it was to reacquaint ourselves with our returning students and to meet the new ones. It was to spend time with parents and school supporters – which means every member of our congregation, because the school is part of our ministry here at Peace. But there was more to it than that. The back to school barbecue is designed to kick off our school year.

Now, why do we operate a school here at Peace? It isn’t just to teach our kids reading and math and social studies. It isn’t to beat the public school’s standardized test scores. I hope those things are happening. But there’s a greater purpose for our school, a purpose that would still be true even if we were giving a second or a third rate education here. Our primary purpose is spiritual. That means that in all we do all day long, our teachings about Christ need to shine through. So today, I want to ask a very basic question: **What do we teach our children?**

I.

The lesson we have before us answers that question. **We teach our children to recognize the power of God.** Moses did that through a miracle. God sent him to confront Pharaoh, king of Egypt with the demand to let his people go. But Pharaoh was a king while Moses represented slaves. So God gave Moses something to back up his demands. God told him to tell Aaron his brother to throw down his staff in front of Pharaoh and it would become a snake. That happened. It wasn’t a trick, like a magician does today. There was no smoke or mirrors involved. God did a miracle. He caused a dead piece of wood to become a living reptile, at least until Aaron grabbed it again and it turned back into wood.

That would truly be something to see! But did you notice what happened when Moses and Aaron did this miracle? Pharaoh didn’t buy it. Now, he could see that snake slithering around on the ground. But he didn’t buy what Moses was using that miracle to prove: that the one true God was commanding him to set God’s people free. So he called in his own magicians and sorcerers. All kings in the ancient world kept guys like that around. Those Egyptian wizards threw their staffs down and they became snakes, too. God did a miracle that demonstrated his power and God’s enemies did a miracle that looked and felt just the same, but it came from a very different source. The devil was the power behind the miracle those men did.

What was supposed to happen? Pharaoh was supposed to see the hand of God in this. As the story goes on, again and again, God did miracles and at first, Pharaoh’s magicians kept up. But after a while, they had to confess, “This is the finger of God.” They couldn’t keep doing the miracles. But long before that happened, Pharaoh should’ve seen the truth, but, as our text says, his heart was hard.

Our job as parents, our job as pastors and teachers, is to teach our children to recognize the real power of God and not to be taken in by fakes. St. Paul says that in the last time, there will be all kinds of counterfeit miracles. And that is the story of our age. There are the false miracles that some Christians embrace, like speaking in tongues or having a saint appear to you. There are the false miracles of the false religions of our day. There are the false miracles of the new age movement – the promises of spells and horoscopes and talking to the dead. All that is very much like what Moses and Aaron witnessed. Now, much of it today is probably just tricks that humans do. But some of it today might be the power of the devil just as it was in Egypt so many

thousands of years ago. And it really isn't our job to figure out which are tricks and which are the devil's power. Our job is to point our children to the real power of God.

There are other false promises of power in our society. Science does all kinds of wonders and miracles. But misused, it also leads people away from God. Medicine is a tremendous gift to our age. But in the end, it isn't doctors and nurses who save lives and restore health. It's God working through them and their treatments. And we need to understand that even while we embrace the gifts that God gives us through modern science. Psychology offers enormous insights into the health of the human mind and heart. Politics offers ways for our society to wrestle with problems and hopefully find solutions. Philosophy examines basic questions of our existence and, at times, offers important insights. But all knowledge that does not lead us to Christ holds out false promises. Today, the fastest growing religion is "no preference" because all that secular learning has fooled enormous numbers of people to believe that our society could be healthy, peaceful and prosperous if we could just get rid of religion.

So God has called us to teach our children to recognize his real power. It's not the lies of the devil. It's not in the fake miracles of false teachers. And it's not in the false promises of human wisdom, as useful as that can be. The true power of God is in his word. And we can even be more specific than that. God's greatest power is in the gospel message. Through that power God does miracles every day. Now, most of them are harder to see than staffs turning into snakes. But they are every bit as great and true. And their effect lasts forever. Through the gospel, God changes hearts. He makes them new and gives them faith. God takes lives that would've been totally committed to the selfish pursuit of gain and he makes them into lives of service. One of the most powerful forces on earth is human selfishness. It wreaks havoc on our society. It powers our economy and causes the orgy of spending that we see at malls at Christmastime. It has cut down forests and built cities and laid waste to vast areas. It destroys marriages and causes parents to abuse and neglect their children. Through his gospel message, God breaks that cycle and changes us. That is real power.

How do we teach our children that power? Certainly, we do it here, every Sunday and we're going to restart Bible class and Sunday school in two weeks and continue to have Bible studies throughout the week. We do it in our school and preschool and high school every day. But it isn't just my job and our teachers' job to do that. God calls you fathers especially, but also you mothers, to teach your children to know the Lord. How are you supposed to do that? Obviously, one way is to bring them here. But you know what? It's not enough just to drop them off in the morning and let the experts take care of it. It's not even enough for you to bring them the church. You need to talk to your children about Jesus. You need to read God's word with them and talk to them about it.

But even that is not enough. You need to show them with your life how important your faith is. You do need to show them that faith comes and hears God's word. You also need to let them see, day in and day out, that you live your life differently than the world does, because you know your Savior. I once heard a pastor tell a story about a young man who was going to work for the summer in a lumber camp up north. His father warned him that those camps were full of rough men who might give him a hard time about his faith. At the end of the summer, when he came home, his father asked him if those lumberjacks had given him a hard time about his faith. His son answered, "No, they never found out about it." Have your children found out about your faith? If not, you're sinning. That sin is just as serious as adultery or robbery or murder. Are you guilty of that sin?

Well, my friends, take heart in God's power, the real power that we've been talking about this morning: the power of forgiveness. Jesus alone of all people who ever lived was perfect in teaching God's love and forgiveness. He did that in our place. It counts for us. Jesus died and he paid for all the times we pastors and teachers and parents failed to teach about his love. He died and he paid for our selfishness and our sinful desires and the sinful nature that wages war against our lives of faith. And his blood has washed all that sin away. Then he rose and declared that we are forgiven, indeed, that we are now perfect in God's sight.

That is the real power we need to point our children to. It's the power to change God's judgment and set us free from hell itself. It's the power to triumph over death. It's the power to give us peace and comfort when life here hurts. It's the power to lift up our hearts and our voices to God in prayer when we need help and in praise when we are blessed. It's the power to lead us parents and ministers to teach the good news to our children, with our words and with our lives, day after day. It's the power that will carry us home to heaven

when we die. Our children need to know that is the real power of God. The miracle here is, in that gospel proclamation, we have the power of God to teach us to know his true power.

II.

That power is not just one power among many. It's not just one tool that might do us some good. That power of God is the greatest power in the universe, because it is the power of God. So if we ask, **What do we teach our children?** The answer has to be, **we teach them to trust the greater power of God.**

In a very graphic way, God showed how much greater his power is. When Pharaoh's magicians threw their staffs down and they became snakes, Aaron's staff-snake ate theirs. That's always intrigued me. I used to wonder if you could've cut Aaron's staff in half after it turned back into a staff, and seen the staffs of the magicians inside it. Sadly, we'll never know. But we do know that God showed Moses and Pharaoh that his power is greater than all that the devil can bring to bear against his Church.

We need to teach our children that God's power in Christ is truly greater than all the power of this world, and all the power of the devil, even greater than all the power of science and our sinful hearts. We need to teach our children to trust that power to protect them and to bring them home to heaven. We need to teach our children to trust that power to change them and to strengthen them to fight against temptation. We need to show them that even when sin wins in our hearts, God's love and forgiveness is still the power to wipe our slate clean in heaven. It's still the power to lift us up when we despair that we will ever live the lives God calls us to live. We need to teach them that the way God uses that power, he changes us little by little. He grows us and matures us. In this life, we'll always have a sinful nature. But God's real power enables us to live a new and holy life. And it's when we are most frustrated by our failures to live for Christ, by our weakness and our cowardice, that we need to turn to God and his love and trust in his power.

God alone has the power to conquer our sinful flesh. God alone has the power to conquer the world in which we live, a world which is running away from him as fast as it can. God alone has the power to preserve the faith of our children and to inspire them to live for Jesus. It's so easy for us to make our faith all about us and how strong we feel and what we want and what we think God should be doing. But in the end, our faith is about Jesus. What he has done and what he promises us. In his love we find our power. You can't trust in Jesus and in yourself. They're mutually exclusive. But Jesus is working in the gospel that we hear, in the gospel in our baptism and in holy communion, Jesus is working when our teachers lead our children to Christ and when we parents show them our Savior. His power will never fail us. It will conquer all that stands against us and it will bring us home. Trust it. Amen.