Friday night we ate at a Chinese restaurant. Always it is the same, egg rolls and rice, soy sauce and hot mustard sauce and sweet and sour sauce. Some chicken or shrimp with vegetable crispy vegetables sharing their flavors in a light sauce. And at the last, the fortune cookie.

Fortune cookies, they are kind of fun. In a group usually one will have a fortune that will bring laughter to the rest. Siliness. But I never open a fortune cookie without just a little wonder, is it true. Will I have the good health and financial independence my fortune promised Friday night?

Or I open the paper to read the horoscopes. Immediately my eye seeks out Scorpio. Avoid beginning new projects today, I read. And I wonder.

Many have told me how it has happened to them. Faced with a decision they prayed. Asked for a sign. As they understood it the sign was given, or events pushed them in one way, or they let the Bible fall open and there before their eyes was the answer. The responsibility for the decision was God's and not their own.

Now whether it be fortune cookies, or horoscopes or praying for signs the desire is the same, to guarantee tomorrow. People have always known that what I do and decide today gives birth to my tomorrow. But in no way that I can predice. I feed my hungry neighbor today. In that deed do I strengthen him that tomorrow he is able to feed himself, or do I make him lazy and dependent. No matter what I intend, no matter how carefully I plan, I do not know the effect of my deed.

I think of a German theologian named Earnst Kasemann. He raised his daughter
ter in the faith. When she was in her twenties she went from Germany to Chile to help the poor. During the time of political instability there, she was raped, kidnapped, tortured, murdered. Meant to be? Or had she misinterpreted some sign? Her father, did he wonder what he might have done to have changed it all?

Our life in this world is like being given a sack full of seeds, seeds of every size and shape. But not one of them is identified. Am I sowing a beautiful flower, a noxious weed, a tasty fruit or vegetable? How can I know? If I take the new job will the extra demands destroy my marriage? If I move to the new house will my child get leukemia, or will she find her best friend next door? If I tell my neighbor what is upsetting me, will she never speak to me again or will she listen so that the walls between us will be torn down? What should I do?

Signs, fortune cookies, horoscopes, whatever it takes we want to avoid the terrible weight of the deciding. Because we know that our decisions will make a difference. The seeds that are planted grow.

Once Jesus was asked: "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Like us, they wanted a sign, something other than faith to cling to. But Jesus said the only sign would be his dying and rising.

Religion is the desire to tap into God. It is the attempt to gain some power over tomorrow. A sign, a secret, something more than faith. The Chinese who invented the fortune cookies, the Persians who studied the movement of the constellations, and every other people has sought through religion to gain some control over God.

But when the almighty God, creator of this universe and every universe
and earth and creature chose to reveal himself, he entered human life in the person of his son, giving one sign that revealed tomorrow, the dying on the cross and the being raised from the dead of Jesus. The sign of Jonah

But for people desperate to guarantee tomorrow that has never seemed enough. And so we turn away from Christ as we seek our tomorrow in fortune cookies, and horoscopes, and the law, God's law. We turn away from Christ even when we seek our security in what God has promised if we seek our security and our helps in God's law.

That is what happened to the people of Galatia. They had heard of Christ, how his death on the cross was their hope and guarantee for tomorrow. They had believed in him. But then others came armed with scripture. Here it says in scripture that God's people should be circumcized, and not eat pork, and obey the Sabbath, not working from Sundown on Friday to sunset on Saturday. Your tomorrows will be more secure if you align your life with God's way they taught the Galatians. Rejoice in Christ today. Rejoice always.

Yes, you can still believe in Christ but also add these other things, you will be more secure.

But when St Paul learned of it he wrote this: I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel - not that there is another gospel, but there are some who want to trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven would preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.

No where else does Paul use such strong language. Not when the Corinthians are engaged in immorality, not when the church is broken by divisions and chaos in worship. When God's people begin to find their hope for tomorrow in something or someone other than Christ then all is lost. Let anyone who preaches a gospel different from Christ and faith in him alone be accursed be damned.

We Lutherans have distilled all that is at issue in the letter to the Galatians into the slogan, we are saved by faith and not by works.
Simply a slogan.

But let me tell you about my father. All the years of my growing up my father would from time to time talk about his faith. When I look to God, depend on him, everything falls into place. In my work I find that he provides just the right solution to every problem. I pray, I trust, I obey his commands and God provides the rest.

Then one day my father prayed, and trusted and obeyed and nothing happened. No solution came. He was overwhelmed by despair. Because God's doing depended on my father's believing and trusting and obeying. My father had no hope.

I've known people who lived by the signs for which they prayed. Things were meant to be, they said, meaning God was taking special care of them. But when good fortune disappeared, and every dream was crushed, God and Christ also.

For a while after Ernst Kaseman's daughter was murdered, he left the Lutheran church. Not because he had lost faith, but because others within the church were saying things like, it goes to show that she was wrong, not where God wanted her to be, otherwise her life would simply not have been wasted like that.

Ernest Kaseman knew, as Paul knew, as I hope each of us knows that there are no signs, no assurances not promises but the sign of Jonah. Jesus Christ giving himself for our sins, being raised for our justification. Whether I live to be a hundred, or die as I am greeting you following worship, neither tells you anything about my relationship to God. Only Christ and his dying for me tells me about God, only what he has done determines my tomorrow. Tomorrow is not in my hands, but is in the hands of him who endured poverty and rejection and death for you and me.

When all is going well, and all speak well of you what does it mean? When a young woman loses her life in a foreign land that may be a far more significant sign from God of his pleasure, for is that not what happened to his Son in this world? Who knows?

We are given one sign, the cross. One hope, that the life Christ lives
we shall live also. One promise, that nothing in life nor in death, things present not things to come shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.