

“Kingdom Miracles”

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Mark 1:29-39 = miracles in God’s kingdom

Jean Pratt Losher, my dear mother, suffered polio when I was four. A paraplegic, she was confined to a bed and wheelchair for the rest of her life. Later a Presbyterian family moved in across the street. There were sons my own age: Steve Caldwell and I often played together after school.



Mrs. Caldwell would visit often. She was of the “Expect a

miracle!” faith-healing side of Christianity.

Well-meaning and with the best of intentions,

she would pray for my mother’s healing and told my

mother that she would walk again if my she only “had

enough faith.” Over time, the well intentioned prayer

took on a more judgmental tone: “you’re not walking

yet, you don’t have enough faith.”

On those occasions after Mrs. Caldwell left, my mother would be in tears.

I would say, “Mother, she’s wrong saying your faith is weak.”

Mother would explain she wasn’t crying because she thought her own faith was weak.

She wasn’t even crying because she couldn’t walk. She was crying because the

faith of her friend required a miracle to believe.

I’ve gained so much of the faith from my Mother.

She had long ago grown past the stage of faith where

we bargain with God, saying “God, prove you are

there by doing what I want.” She indeed hoped for,

prayed for, wanted a miracle. But in contrast to dear

Mrs. Caldwell, Mother accepted with gratitude whatever outcome God

bestowed, and blessed God whatever the circumstances. This is not faith

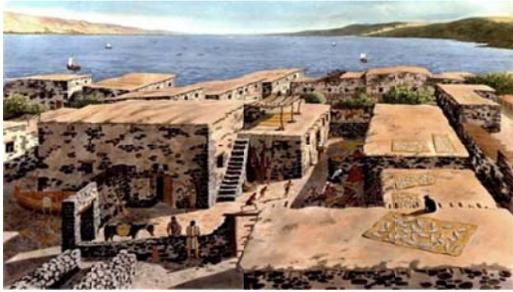
like Mrs. Caldwell’s turning cynical when the answer is “No.” Instead, like

Job:

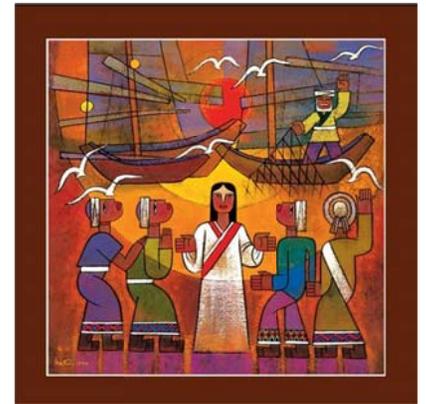
“The LORD gives. The LORD takes away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.”



Between Advent and Lent, we're reading our way through the first chapter of Mark. Verses 21-39 cover the first 24 hours of Jesus' ministry. Jesus inaugurated God's reign in one single Sabbath day ~ a solitary but extraordinary twenty four hour period. On that incredible day Jesus initiates his ministry by:



- calling his first disciples to follow him;
- teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum astounding everyone;
- exorcising an unclean spirit on a Sabbath ~ breaking the law and upsetting the Rabbis;
- healing Peter's mother-in-law on a Sabbath ~ again disturbing the peace;
- and then Jesus closed that extraordinary first day of God's kingdom by "curing many who were sick with various diseases, and casting out many demons."



What a day! This day represents a microcosm of Jesus' earthly ministry ~ calling, teaching and proclaiming, casting out demons, healing ~ a clear portrait of God's plan.

If we were there, which camp would we be in? Would we have been among the astounded ~ or the scoffers ~ or worse yet, among Jesus' accusers? If astounded, would we be paying more attention to the miracles, or would we instead direct our attention to listening and learning from Jesus?

Modernity has a real love-hate relationship with the miracle stories of Jesus. Thomas Jefferson and other folks of the Enlightenment actually took scissors and would cut the miracle stories out. Today we tend to fall into exclusive camps: Those who look at the Gospels and see their own rationality reflected back. They emphasize Jesus as



moral teacher to the exclusion of all else. Another camp tends to overemphasize the miraculous and make it proof of faith. Both camps think they have the whole story.



Mrs. Caldwell with all her good intentions, she rationalizes the failure to receive a miracle as a sign of weakness. She reduces prayer down to "Jean, if you were worthy God will give you what you ask." That emphatically is not how God works. Jesus didn't work that way either.

That first day of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum, most of those coming for exorcism and healing were undoubtedly unworthy of such a gift. Yet in Jesus' eyes and God's eyes, the unworthy are the very ones most in need of wholeness, most in need of restoration in their lives.



God's actions do not follow our logic. God's thoughts are indeed far beyond ours. Those on whom God bestows or does not bestow a miracle is a calculus we should never try to make. We emphatically do not earn a miracle. God grants miracles not because of our worthiness ~ but on account of our unworthiness. That's what we mean by grace.

The Gospels are at great pains to make the point that Jesus did not want to be followed because he worked miracles. That's why he silenced the spirits and moved on to the next village when people became more interested in miracles than his message. Jesus was insistent:

"Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."



The mission is to proclaim the message, not to become just one more of the hundreds of self-proclaimed miracle workers crisscrossing the land. Jesus healed everyone, men, women, rich, poor, deserving, undeserving. While healings were integral to Jesus' ministry, it is too easy to mistake them for the mission.

Miracles are part of the mission but not the whole mission. The last thing Jesus wanted was for them to distract us from his message of God's realm coming into the world.

Yet my mind has been changed. In Seminary, I bought the rationalist line that miracles had essentially died out in the Modern era. I was not trained in any way, shape or form to perform exorcisms. After all, in the Mainline Churches, it seldom comes up. Pentecostal churches, yes, sometimes Catholic, but generally not in the Presbyterian Church.



Then I served in Indonesia where requests for exorcisms are routine. Among those cultures illness is understood as being caused by someone or some evil spirit. The terms for common illnesses are a foreign substance being pushed into the body by a malevolent spirit.

I would be asked to perform exorcisms along with indigenous pastors. I had to wrestle with my conscience. I am not an exorcist, never aspired to be one, so I thought to refuse. However, remembering I routinely pray for healing for anyone who asks, I consented. So I would pray in my own way for healing. The individuals on the sickbed would conceive it differently as an exorcism of an evil spirit. And guess what, it worked. Despite my own lack of any healing gift, God intervened anyway, and whatever ailment was there passed.

I came to know that with unclean spirits, and indeed with all interventions of prayer, the outcome is not in our hands but in God's. Good outcomes are not because of any power or specialness on our part, but rather because of God's grace.

Miracles are signs of kingdom, part and partial to the kingdom, but they are not God's kingdom by themselves. Nor is any other part. Today Christians have drawn a number of false dichotomies, not the least of which is between the miraculous and teachings, between the emotional and the rational.



Yet as in that long, first 24 hours of Jesus' ministry in Mark, we see that Jesus mission is holistic involves many dimensions: calling, teaching and

proclaiming, casting out demons, healing. Jesus does not allow himself to be drawn into doing only portions of the mission. Jesus does all of it wherever he goes.

With God's kingdom come miracles. Living in God's reign does mean healing, health and wholeness ~ and discipleship ~ and moral self-examination ~ and learning new ways of being ~ and seeking justice ~ and making peace ~ and looking after the least of these ~ and God's plan for us includes miracles, God only knows when and how ~ all these unlimited in time and space.