

Mark 1:29-39

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her.

³¹ So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

³² That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered at the door, ³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. ³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

³⁸ Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." ³⁹ So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Sermon: Jesus Has Authority to Heal

Mark launches the ministry of Jesus at a breakneck pace. Having just exorcized a demon in the Capernaum's synagogue, he leaves with his four disciples and goes to the home of Simon and Andrew. And this sets up a pattern that we discover in Mark, namely that Jesus does one thing in *public* and then he does something similar in a *home*. It is as if Mark is saying that the kingdom of God impacts not only the public sphere of life, but also one's private life. Our reading this morning covers four separate incidents. First there is the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, which—incidentally—tells us that at least one of the disciples was married! Second, we read, not unsurprisingly, that the news of the exorcism had spread and so many people came to Jesus after sunset to be healed. Third, early in the morning Jesus leaves to find a quiet place to pray. And fourth, instead of staying in Capernaum, Jesus starts a preaching tour throughout the region of Galilee. The central person in the drama is Jesus, the one who proclaims the kingdom of God in word and deed—the one who has authority to heal.

According to Jewish custom, the main Sabbath meal came immediately after the synagogue service at noon. Having arrived at the house of Simon and Andrew, we are then informed that Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and *immediately* they tell Jesus about her. And so we witness the first miracle of Jesus. He is not only a preacher, teacher, and exorcist; Jesus is a *healer*. The details are sparse, but let's explore the text that we have.

First, Jesus touched her; he took her by the hand. The fact that Jesus touches people who are sick, and even dead bodies, is going to be a feature in his healing ministry. Jesus is clearly not afraid of being made ritually unclean by being in physical contact with sickness and death. In the words Isaiah uses to describe the suffering servant, Jesus was "acquainted with sickness."¹ Isaiah's poetic description continues: "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases." It is as if through touch, their sickness was transferred to Jesus and *his* vitality and wholeness was transferred back to them!

Second, Jesus didn't require or seek an audience when he healed. His compassion moved him to heal just as well within a small circle in a home as in a large crowd in a public place. Nor did Jesus have to perform flamboyant rituals; he just spoke an authoritative sentence and the healing was complete. This effortlessness, as Mark portrays it, only reinforces the authority of Jesus, the Messiah.

The next observation concerning this first miracle can seem annoying, especially to women! We are told that "the fever left her and she began to wait on them." Understandably, many women today react negatively to the picture of a woman getting up after a severe illness only to serve a bunch of lazy men! However, we need to be mindful of reading understandable issues from our own culture

¹ Isa 53:3

into the text. I suggest this sentiment is inappropriate for this 1st century household. Instead, consider the complex gender and social roles in the following way: Simon's mother-in-law is sick *in bed*. She cannot fulfill the role of supervising and serving a meal to the guests, which would have fallen to her as a *senior* woman of the household. Quite likely, Peter's wife and female servant would have already prepared the food *before* the Sabbath. But Peter's mother-in-law, being sick, would not have the privilege of showing hospitality to important guests. Her *service* should be seen as a matter of *honour*, not of menial servitude. In this healing, Jesus *restores her social position* within the household. We must not underestimate the significance of Jesus healing *women* in that society, thereby elevating their status and empowering them. More generally, the kingdom of God restores relationships, dignity, and gives "life in all its fullness." The Hebrew word is *shalom*, healing is holistic in Jewish thought: peace with God, one's neighbour, and with creation. *This is what the Kingdom of God looks like.*

We are left with the obvious question: If God is still reigning—as Christians proclaim—why don't we witness *more* miracles today? We must wrestle honestly and responsibly with this issue because of its theological *and* pastoral importance. For those who are suffering, the stakes can be especially high, as a miracle is often deemed to be the last hope. Consequently, some caution is needed. Fascination with what the New Testament calls "signs and wonders" is nothing new, but we demean our relationship with our Trinitarian God if we become "miracle-chasers."

Since miracles were an important feature of Jesus' reputation, it makes no sense to dismiss them completely as mythical. So we must ask the question, "What is the *theological significance* of a miracle?" A miracle is a transparent moment in which the kingdom of God is found to be manifestly present. Something that is *hidden* is being revealed—which relates to the meaning of "epiphany." Oxford theologian Keith Ward writes: "On rare occasions . . . material objects may transcend their natural powers as to become awe-inspiring sacraments and vehicles of the Divine. . . [These are] not mere anomalies . . . but *epiphanies of the Spirit, showing the underlying nature and the final destiny and purpose of the material order.*"² The phrase "epiphanies of the Spirit" means that these mighty deeds *reveal* the Trinity at work. Such acts show the wholeness within creation that God intends, and reveal what will one day become a reality at the end of time when God's kingdom comes in all its fullness. Another way of putting it is to say, miracles are *glimpses of the future in the present*. I find this view of the miraculous insightful; consider Jesus' resurrection, for example, in this light. His resurrection body is the kind of body we will all have one day—that's quite a thought! When we pray for a miracle we are really asking for a glimpse of the future in the present. This provides an explanation for the scarcity of miracles even in this (post-Pentecost) age of the Holy Spirit. Miracles, then, are profound *signs of grace* that demonstrate the truth of his message, namely, that the Kingdom of God is *near*.

² Ward, *Divine Action*, 178, emphasis mine.

Moreover, while we know miracles will be rare, by definition, I believe we have grounds to expect clusters of them to occur where the Spirit of God is discerned to be particularly active. The New Testament evidence suggests this is most likely to happen at the “cutting edge” of kingdom of God activities where systemic evils are being confronted. I see no biblical, theological, or scientific reason why that should not still be the case today.

While we live in this present age, we also wait for the age to come. We find this waiting *hard*; we long for that day when all that is wrong in the world will be finally put right. We don’t understand the delay in the face of so much suffering. And we don’t *really* understand why we don’t see *more* glimpses of the future in the present. While we live with some frustration and impatience in the “now-and-not-yet” kingdom of God, there is also a sense of excitement and anticipation—for the best is yet to come!

A final point before moving on: A miracle is *not* a reward for good behavior or fervent faith! No mention is made of Simon’s faith or that of his mother-in-law. And nowhere in the Bible is the person who receives exorcism said to have faith. Some people today agonize as to whether the “reason” they did not experience the miracle they so desperately sought was because they lacked sufficient faith. This mistakenly assumes that if you had *enough* faith, it would certainly tip the balance in your favor. I don’t think God’s providence functions like that! Miracles are not granted on the basis of the magnitude of the faith-doubt ratio. Faith and doubt are inseparable—two sides of the same coin; the opposite of faith is *not* doubt, but certainty.³ It is all about the mystery of grace. Miracles are signs of grace and the lavish generosity of God being publically revealed.

So be encouraged *to* pray with both confident faith *in* God’s capabilities, and with a spirit of humility and forgiveness. Although prayer *has* the real potential to alter the outcome of events, it is not a wizard’s wand—as we all know! The outcome of our prayers may not be what we earnestly desire. In which case we must *not* blame the sufferer, or doubt the character or existence of God. Yes, there is mystery—even tension—here, but I hope we can *trust* God to be true to his loving nature, regardless of what transpires. In the final analysis, the precise details of what God is doing may be hidden from us, but that does *not* mean God is absent. Regardless of an inevitable element of mystery in such things, Christians believe God is *continually active* in all of creation and works to bring good out of evil.

Moving on: There is no way that Jesus could keep secret or quiet what he did in the synagogue. Peter’s house was soon besieged with people seeking Jesus. Naturally, they waited until sunset, as that was when the Sabbath ended, because they did not want to violate the Sabbath regulations! Mark stresses that these first, dramatic actions of Jesus occurred *on* the Sabbath, something that did not trouble Jesus in the slightest—but for which he would later be criticized (see Mark 3). People

³ “We walk by faith, *not* by sight,” 2 Cor 5:7. See also Heb 11:1.

flocked to Jesus with a sense of expectation because they recognized that in him was a man who could *do things*. We don't really know their motives, but I suspect that a good number did *not* come out of love for him or his message; they just wanted to be on the receiving end of his compassion and healing. Put crudely, they were "using him"; they were "miracle-chasers." The same is often true today. Many, who have never prayed when the sun is shining, pray when the cold winds blow. Religion becomes the last insurance policy, only to be used in a crisis. But God is *not* someone to be sought only in days of trouble; he is someone to be loved, honoured, and remembered every day of our lives. Nevertheless, regardless of people's faith and motives, we are told Jesus healed *many* in Capernaum.

It appears that Jesus had a very busy day and was left with little time alone. Mark writes: "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." Prayer in the morning reveals his *Jewishness*,⁴ but also his full humanity. There are two other occasions where Mark records Jesus as withdrawing to pray alone.⁵ In times of stress, temptation, and decision, he turns to God for strength and guidance. For Mark, prayer is not peripheral to the life of Jesus, and by implication, not peripheral to those who follow. We are encouraged, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, "to draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."⁶ Prayer is another big topic for another occasion, other than to say: *not* to pray is to be guilty of incredible foolishness of not inviting God to be involved in our lives.

When he is found in that lonely place, the four disciples think they know what Jesus *should* have been doing, and that is *not* sitting in solitude praying when anxious crowds await his immediate attention! Yet Jesus is not seduced by the popularity he has in Capernaum; if he is tempted, Jesus resists and moves on.⁷ Jesus has not forgotten his task; he has come to proclaim the Kingdom of God and not simply to respond incessant cries of the crowd. Jesus could have just stayed where he was in Capernaum, and let his reputation go far and wide—and let others seek *him* out from further afield as a Holy man, a healer, and a prophet. But no, *he seeks them out*; he understands that it is his job to reach out and to introduce them to the good news of the kingdom of God.

I want to end on that point. Jesus the Messiah, the Holy one of God, *seeks them out*. This reflects the bigger mission of the Trinity, who continues to seek us out. God *pursues us* and comes to defeat evil and to bring healing and wholeness. Amen.

⁴ Psalm 5:3 and 88:13.

⁵ Mark 6:46; 14:32.

⁶ Heb 4:16.

⁷ One reason why Mark has Jesus silencing demons is to inhibit publicizing his true identity.