

January 28, 2018 – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
“Miracle?”

Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Mark 1:21-28

Every now and then it is helpful to try and walk into a biblical story in order more fully to appreciate the nuances and dynamics of exactly what is occurring. In order to do that I'm going to ask you to use your imagination for a bit. You may want to close your eyes as you try and envision this scene that was just described by the writer of Mark's gospel.

It's Jesus' first public act in Mark. He has been baptized by John, then he spent time in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, after which he walked by the sea of Galilee and called at least 4 of the disciples – Andrew, Simon, James and John – to join him in fishing for people. He walked into the synagogue in Capernaum – a city in the Galilee. It was the Sabbath and he began to teach. Those gathered were amazed, in fact, they were astonished with his teaching. There was something different about his words. Those who heard them were compelled by them. Mark described him as “one who taught with authority” – and not as any other teacher they had heard before.

The folks were amazingly attentive – concentrating on his every word. His sermon was going so well when all of the sudden, out of the mouth of one in attendance came words that shocked everyone. They were words that rivaled Jesus' teaching. They were words seeking to undercut his authority. Yet they were words that recognized Truth.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

To which Jesus responds calmly yet forcefully, “Be silent, and come out of him!”

You are in that synagogue. You have just witnessed something you cannot explain nor fully understand. What is your response?

Take a few minutes to be with whatever you feel as you re-envision that scene, and when I ring the bell, slowly open your eyes and come back into this space.

[Pause]

I invited you to enter into that brief guided meditation because this is a passage that intrigues me yet confounds my understanding of exactly what is going on and how it applies to our lives today. And when that happens I've learned it's often best to let the hearers come to some understanding themselves what the story means to them.

On first reading, you notice that it is a story within a story. It begins by recognizing the teaching ministry of Jesus. It didn't take too long before everyone was beginning to notice that he was no ordinary rabbi. There was something different about his teaching. His words demanded attention and automatically elicited a response.

But then there's this weird exorcism that creates more questions in my mind than answers. How do we in the modern world get our heads around demons calling out of seemingly innocent bodies and a Savior who responds with the power to silence them and call them out? And it's all right there in the Bible – believe it or not.

In preaching on this text in the past, my focus was on some of the important words in the text – one being the difference between authority and power. Jesus taught as one with “exousia” in Greek – or one with authority and did not resort to dynamis or power in Greek. Even a brief comparison of those two words helps us to understand that authority can only be manifest by one who is completely and comfortably standing firm in his/her role. Authority comes from an inner wisdom – it is deep and grounded – it is in essence **Truth**. While the one who resorts to the use of power relies upon outside forces to complete a task and dominate a situation. Authority comes from within. Power is external and requires much more effort – a source of strength that needs constant renewal.

On other occasions, I've reflected on the differences exhibited in the gospels as Jesus deployed his obvious authority. For example, in Matthew's reworking of the early chapters in Mark, we hear the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount – wise and challenging words that stirred the imaginations and innate hope for those with ears to hear; whereas in Mark we see the teachings of Jesus as words demand action. Mark is not a gospel of extended sermonizing or teaching. Mark gets the job done – quickly and efficiently.

These are both plausible and important messages contained in the text.

But this time I find myself drawn to the supposed exorcism of Jesus and I'm having a devil of a time (pun intended) trying to figure out what to make of it. Are we simply to write it off as the primitive activity of a pre-scientific era – one in

which they knew next to nothing about psychological theory, diagnosis, medicine, and various treatment options? I wonder?

The unnamed man is sick. Unclean spirits are amoral in Mark's gospel – and all of the New Testament, for that matter. The man is ill and in need of help. As Biblical Historian Howard Clark Kee observes, “Neither medicine nor magic is the cure.” We moderns, of course, think more of the former; a diagnosis is needed, treatments and the like. Some ancients thought of the latter; a curse has been pronounced, one that needs to be broken. But as Kee rightly notes, “the ministry of Jesus posits another possibility – miracle.”¹

That's the issue – miracle – and whether we, in our day, can render them plausible. Do you believe in miracles?

Several years ago there was a book published – and popularized, in part, around San Diego by Terry Cole-Whittaker entitled *A Course In Miracles*. It was praised by some as a spiritual enlightenment, laughed at by others as frivolous psychobabble, and severely criticized by still others as the work of the devil himself. At base, it dealt with the idea of the very real plausibility of miracles – among others, the miracle of discovering one's true self in discovering and living your bliss – or the life God had intended for you.

That may all sound a little woo-woo to you. I don't know. It's not really my cup of tea, but I also don't want to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” What do we do with “miracle?”

We hear it all the time. We use the expression rather loosely when we simply cannot explain an answer to prayer, or a near tragic accident, or a life that is spared of terminal illness – “It's a miracle,” we say. But what does that mean? Or I should say, what do we mean?

I remember singing a song as a kid in the church I grew up in. Perhaps you know it:

I believe in miracles. I've seen a soul set free.
Miraculous, the change in one redeemed through Calvary.
I've seen the lily push its way up through the stubborn sod.
I believe in miracles, for I believe in God.

¹ Mike Graves, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1, p. 313.

A little different, I grant you from Hot Chocolate's version:

I believe in miracles, where you from, you sexy thing.

All that aside. Let's get back to the scene in Mark. What's the real miracle here? I suppose the case could be made that it's Jesus' seeming ability to silence the unclean spirit – to insist it leave the unnamed man – to bring him to wholeness and peace. Indeed, that's a miracle. But it goes deeper than that, I think. I wonder if the real miracle is that Jesus SEES the hurting marginalized one – really sees him – and sees his desperate need and then does something about that need.

The miracle that the those in the synagogue witnessed that day was a whole lot more than the calling out of a demon. I believe the miracle was the inauguration of a whole new way of teaching with authority – the likes of which they had never seen before. Jesus, in his first act of ministry – not only hears, but sees an unnamed man in need and heals him of the misery that likely plagued him for years. By his action, Jesus announces to the world that his ministry will be one of miracle indeed – the miracle of looking beyond those important people – whom everyone else notices – and to touch the lives of those on the outside – those who no one will give the time of day.

Jesus' ministry was going to be very different than what they had experienced before. His was a ministry to those previously overlooked – those without voice, those on the margins.

It's a miracle. Really! And it's something, I believe, still happens today. It happens when you and I do likewise – to peer deeply into the in the face of human need and to respond out of love and care. It's there (and in many other ways) that miracles still happen. I really believe that. I believe in miracles. Because I believe in God – who was, and is, and always will be the source of all that is good in life.

(Close by inviting congregation to close eyes and imagine where they need to see a miracle today in their lives. Envision really seeing the need - the person or situation - and the healing that needs to occur).

Close in prayer.