

“Hope in God’s Healing”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 1: 29-39

What qualifies as a miracle for you? Seeing your favorite sports team win a championship? Getting to work on-time without your regular cup of coffee in the morning? Passing a test in school that you felt you were sure you were going to fail? Many times, we will use the term “miracle” to give explanation to something that on its surface appears to be unexplainable.

What about in this time of pandemic? It certainly seems miraculous that we are putting shots of vaccine into people’s arms less than one year after the discovery of this coronavirus. It certainly seems miraculous that several in our congregation – Jeff Roberts and Danny Fultz immediately come to mind – have survived and recovered from major surgeries which took place during the height of this pandemic. It certainly seems miraculous that technology allows us to see and hear those whom we love when we cannot be with them face-to-face.

One of the definitions I found for “miracle” is “a wonder or wonderful thing; such an event considered as a work of God” (Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, © 1983). Jesus’ identity is often tied directly to miracles. In the gospels, miracles are described as events that defy human explanation, and are definitely considered works of God. In our modern world, we will usually label an event as a miracle when we cannot explain it logically or scientifically. Or, we will ask God for a miracle, which will solve a specific problem we feel we have no control over, such as an illness, an economic crisis, or something else. And yet, as we will see in this passage from Mark, the miracle man we see in Jesus is not just about healing. The miracle occurs when we encounter face-to-face the one God has sent to proclaim his message of grace, healing, and redemption.

Today’s story from Mark follows on the heels of last week’s story, when Jesus heals the man of the unclean spirit. In fact, the events described here are occurring during the same day as last week’s story; we read, “As soon as they left the synagogue,” referring to the place where Jesus had just taught and then healed the man. So, after being present with the people in worship and providing healing, Jesus now enters the home of two of his disciples, Simon and Andrew, with James and John joining the party, as well.

The space in which this healing takes place is significant. We have progressed from a space of worship – the synagogue – to a space of family and friends – the home. We have gone from a public space to

a private space, where relationships are closer, more intimate, and very personal. Not only that, but for those early-Christians who would have been reading Mark's Gospel, they would have likely been doing so in home-church settings, the most common form of early-Christian gatherings. To hear their Savior offering healing and wholeness in a similar setting as theirs would have most certainly been encouraging and inspiring for those first believers.

In comparison to the healing in the synagogue, this is a more personal concern: it is one of Jesus' disciple's relatives who is gravely ill. "Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told (Jesus) about her at once" (1:30). Jesus doesn't just say, "Be healed." He reached out, took her by the hand, "and lifted her up." The verb in Greek that is translated "lifted up" is the same verb used by Mark in describing Jesus' resurrection in chapter 16, when the angel announces "Jesus has been raised" (16:9). This healing occurs through Jesus' touch of the sick woman, and she is relieved of her ailment.

Did you notice how Simon's mother-in-law responds to this miracle? "Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them" (1:31). Her response to being restored to wholeness by God's love is to serve. In one commentator's words: *Her response is variously translated: "she waited on them," "cooked for them," "served them." It has been widely noted that the Greek term used for her action is the word from which we derive the word "deacon," and this at the very beginning of this first Gospel.*

In the world in which we live and move and have our being, service is a term for jobs of inferior rank: servers, the service industry, service stations. When we've become successful, says this ideology, others serve us. But the Jesus we meet in the Gospels, who "did not come to be served but to serve," teaches us that service is the higher, even the highest calling (Mark 10: 42-22). To serve for the sake of others is the mark of true discipleship (Victoria Lynn Garvey, *Christian Century*, January 27, 2021: 20).

But now, after the healing in the synagogue and the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, the word is out. Once the Sabbath is over at sundown, everyone starts looking for this miracle man. "They brought to (Jesus) all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door." How would you like to be Simon or Andrew and have "the whole city" inside and surrounding your house? What a scene that must have been for all who were present. What must have been going through the minds of Simon, Andrew, James and John? How would any of us have responded?

There is no question about how Jesus responded. "And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him" (1:34). Jesus was not overwhelmed by the crowds. Jesus was not

annoyed with the inconvenience. Jesus simply acted with the compassion and love and care that embodied his very being, and cured all who were broken, so that they would be made whole.

The final scene of this miracle story is one that many of us can relate to. I can see Jesus sneaking out while everyone is sound asleep, before the sun rises on a new day, in order to find “a deserted place, and there he prayed” (1:35). After all that had transpired in the previous 24 hours, after all that he had done to teach and heal and love the children of God, Jesus needed to reconnect with his Father. He sought renewal, strength, and guidance, and so he went by himself and prayed.

Of course, it is Jesus’ disciples who bring to an end Jesus’ time of solitude. Like children anxiously wondering how to behave, “Simon and his companions hunted for (Jesus),” and “when they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you’” (1:37). In other words, “Where did you go? Why did you leave us with all these people? Fix it!”

Instead of admonishing them, Jesus speaks with compassion – both for the crowds and for his disciples. “He answered, ‘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’” (1:38). In that statement, Jesus’ mission is clear. He did not come to remain in one place – in a synagogue or a house – but to go to where the people are – “to the neighboring towns.” His healing of the sick or possessed is not distinct or separate from his teaching and preaching God’s Word to the masses. Jesus went – he did not stand still. And his preaching and teaching went hand-in-hand with his ability to restore wholeness to the broken all around him.

There are times when we are broken, and we seek God’s wholeness. Our bodies may be broken, and we are frustrated that we cannot do what we once did. Our minds may be broken, ravaged by worry and disease. Our hearts may be broken, wounded by personal attacks or betrayed by people we trusted. It is tempting in those moments to ask God to fix everything, and in saying that we expect miracles. It is tempting in those moments to look at the world only through human eyes, rather than trusting in the sight of our Creator.

Miracles do not occur according to our expectations; they occur according to God’s expectations. If we are only looking for miracles to take away all of our problems, then we will likely miss our Lord literally walking in our midst, lifting us up, and showing us what God’s love is truly about. Jesus is not just a miracle man; Jesus is the man who God sent to proclaim a message that teaches, restores, and inspires all of us to witness God’s presence in our midst.

While there are many who have witnessed miracles of healing during this pandemic, there are thousands and thousands who have seen loved ones taken from them due to Covid-19. There was a

powerful example of this side of the pandemic on “60 Minutes” last Sunday, as families told their stories of loss, grief, and pain. Where is their miracle? What happens when their prayers were not answered in a way they had hoped or expected? Perhaps the miracle takes the form of being able to simply wake up and face the next day, do the next thing, and living through the pain with the knowledge that they are not alone in the journey which is before them.

I think about the thousands of health care workers who have treated people with the virus, who have seen patients – like Peter’s mother-in-law – who have suffered from high fevers and other ailments related to Covid-19. Many of these servants have given so much, they are spent, they are exhausted, they are burned-out. Perhaps the miracle takes the form of them mustering up the strength to face one more day, or they witness small signs of progress in a patient, and they begin to see a light at the end of this dark tunnel. Perhaps the miracle is that God never abandons them in their calling to serve the most broken in our world.

On Friday, I led the funeral for Paige McElfresh, daughter of Nick and Cristy, and granddaughter of Margaret Rennaker, a longtime member of John Knox who now lives in Arizona. Paige’s life reminded me of my cousin Jenny’s life, as they both battled the demons of addiction, and ultimately their bodies could not overcome the diseases they endured. As I stood there and looked at Paige in the casket, 25-years-old, only four years older than my oldest child, amid the sobs and tears of her parents and family, I asked, “Where is the miracle, God? Where is hope and healing for this family devastated by such a tragic loss?” Perhaps the miracle comes when even though we can’t see it, hear it, experience it at that particular moment, God is still with us, God never abandons us. “For I am convinced that nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

May we all experience hope in the healing that God offers through God’s Son, Jesus Christ, a hope that is truly miraculous, if only we have an ounce of faith.

Thanks be to God. Amen.