

## **Do Miracles Happen?** (First in the series: Hot Topics)

**Text: Mark 6:1-6**

**7/11/10**

### **I**

A religious man is on top of his roof during a great flood. A man comes by in a boat and says "get in, get in!" The religious man replies, "No I have faith in God, he will grant me a miracle."

Later the water is up to his waist and another boat comes by and the guy tells him to get in again. He responds that he has faith in god and god will give him a miracle. With the water at about chest high, another boat comes to rescue him, but he turns down the offer again because "God will grant me a miracle."

With the water at chin high, a helicopter throws down a ladder and they tell him to get in, but mumbling with the water in his mouth, he again turns down the offer of help for the faith of God. He arrives at the gates of heaven with broken faith and says to Peter, "I thought God would grant me a miracle and I have been let down." St. Peter chuckles and responds, "I don't know what you're complaining about, we sent you three boats and a helicopter."

It's an old joke (and maybe not a very good one) but it makes the point so very well: What kind of miracle are you looking for and if it happened would you know it?

I wonder if many of us just want God to be a bit more obvious. Can't we have the parting of the Red Sea, the 10 plagues, and the manna in the wilderness all over again? Wouldn't that ease the uncertainty of our times?

Some will settle for less. Some folks will stand in line to see the image of Mother Teresa on a sweet roll (the "nun bun"), the outline of crucified man on the Shroud of Turin, or the face of Jesus faintly seen on the side of wet building. And a great many don't have room for miracles anymore (Unless it is the release of a miraculous new iphone for which they will line up for days, as if Moses and Jesus were holding a book signing.)

So does God "intervene" within or beyond the laws of nature? Why? And would we know it if God did?

## II

**In the first five chapters of Mark's gospel we run into a Jesus who at least nine times is reported to be healing in a wondrous way. He casts out evil spirits, heals Peter's mother-in-law, heals a paralytic, cures a man of leprosy, and brings back a little girl from death. He makes quite a splash.**

It's such a splash that by the time he gets back home, in our reading, to Nazareth the people have already heard about him. *"What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he does even miracles? Isn't this the carpenter?...And they took offense at him."*

These folks didn't even like respect Jesus and still they affirmed the fact that he did miracles. Nobody accused him a being a faker, a magician. In the third chapter of Mark's gospel when Jesus calls his apostles he commissions them *"that they might be with him and that the might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons."* (3:14) It seems Jesus expected them to do some of what he was doing – proclaim the word of God and demonstrate God's healing power.

Did Jesus – and some of his followers - do miracles? Unless we believe the biblical record is wrong, or should be explained away because it comes from a more primitive time, the answer is yes.

So do they still happen? Does God still act in ways that seem beyond the norm? Does God heal people? If you don't believe anything happens outside of the iron clad laws of nature, then the answer is "no". If you have theology that confines the miracles of the New Testament to the first century, then the answer is "no". But if you believe in a God who is not limited to the normal processes of nature and is free to go beyond them, why would the answer be anything but "yes"?

I suspect that makes some of us swallow very hard. We've grown up with a scientific worldview that teaches us to doubt any explanation that doesn't conform to the laws of nature. And I would never want to say that every claim a "miracle" happened is a legitimate claim.

The claim of a "miracle" raises an important question for each of us. Do you live in a world in which God is free to act, or in a world where God has already been excluded as a possible answer to the question?

### III

**But if miracles happen they don't seem to happen with the predictability of apples falling off of trees, do they? God seems to be economical in our time when it comes to the miraculous.**

To get back to the text for a minute, the Jesus who could do miracles didn't have many to offer in his hometown. *"He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith."*

It seems that a miracle has as much to do with what we bring to God as it does with what God brings to us. Jesus was not a magician. He was not the David Copperfield of the ancient world. His miracles sought something deeper than the applause of the crowd.

Do we get up in the morning with the willingness to see God at work in this world? Or do we just get up and stumble through another day? Fourteen hundred years ago Pope Gregory the Great wrote:

*All men wondered to see the water turned into wine. Every day, the earth's moisture being drawn through the root of the vine, is turned by the grape into wine, and no man wonders. Full of wonder then are all the things men never think to wonder at.*

C.S. Lewis once wrote that a miracle is a local example of what God is doing in the world all the time. Water gets changed into wine not only once in Galilee but in a thousand vines in a thousand vineyards everyday. God feeds five thousand with a multiplication of grain and fish not only in the ancient past but through countless fields and countless fishermen for countless millions in countless towns every day. God heals the sick not only by the hand of Jesus in Capernaum but through the numerous hands of doctors and nurses in a thousand clinics in a thousand places.

If we ban the hand of God from so called natural and ordinary world, then we should not be surprised that we rarely find him in extraordinary ways. Almost every miracle could be something else. A cancer inexplicably cured, a voice in a dream – or dumb luck and a psychological delusion? Faith in God is less likely to proceed from miracles, than miracles from faith in God. (Buechner)

So seeing a miracle has something to do with our readiness to see one. But it also has to do with God's purpose in providing one. In the Bible most of the miracles cluster around two key events in the biblical history: the exodus of Israel from Egypt and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Those showy miracles – frightening plagues, parting rivers, drowning armies, manna in the wilderness had the function of showing this was God at work saving his people from the greatest power in the known world.

And a stone rolled away, a resurrected Jesus, a church filled with the wonder-working power of the Holy Spirit revealed that Jesus was God's messiah who came to defeat the darkest powers of sin and death.

I don't think God does miracles willy-nilly; I think God does them purposefully. He is not running a carnival, he is redeeming a world. But we are ever so tempted to hunger for the miracles more than the one who does them.

#### IV

**It may be that the greatest miracle is not a river parted, or a Berlin Wall fallen, or a cancer cured, or a paralyzed person who recovers the ability to walk. The greatest miracle is human heart transformed to trust God with its life and future.**

We said earlier that a miracle is a local example of what God is doing all the time. But that's not all. A miracle also expresses what God has not yet done but will do.

When Jesus Christ rose from the dead it wasn't just a statement about Jesus; it was a statement about us. His miracle is to become our miracle. His communion with God is to become our communion with God. His glorified body is a preview of our glorified body.

At its deepest level a miracle tells where our story and the story of the whole world is going. They invite us – however few or many we may experience – to trust God to bring us to that future.

Jesus said as much to his ancient followers. At the last supper when they were struggling to trust him, struggling to believe that this man was worth risking it for, he said:

*Believe me when I say I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these...(John 14:12)*

That's one of those biblical promises that haunts and inspires me. I think it is meant to haunt and inspire the whole church. It's the miracle that can happen in a church where men and women are striving to trust God with their lives beyond any other loyalty; any other power. That kind of trust is a miracle for which we should pray, and hope, and seek.

*I tell you the truth anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.*

Do miracles happen? Jesus seems to be saying they can; they must. We are to be doing, what he has been doing, because that's where the world is headed. So there are countless hungry people who must be fed. There are countless sick people who must be healed. There are countless victims who need to see some justice. There are millions trapped in their sin who need to hear the word of grace and redemption through Christ. There are innumerable people in difficult and dangerous situations who need to know that nothing can separate them from the love of Jesus Christ.

It will take nothing short of a miracle. And Jesus seems to be saying we are the people capable of becoming one if we can trust him. Has God done that miracle in your heart?

## V

*“He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.”*

Do miracles happen? I'd love to give you a simple answer. If Jesus is any guide the answer seems to be a clear “yes”, “no”, and “maybe”.

The grand miracle of a redeemed heart can be had immediately. The grand miracle of a resurrected believer will have to wait. And whatever other miracles can be had today will be found at a busy intersection, where all that God is ready to bring to us rubs up against the faith that we are ready to bring to God.