

Proper 18, Year B  
September 5, 2021  
[Mark 7:31-37](#)

In the Name of the True and Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Miracles. They are “extraordinary events that constitute inexplicable manifestations of God’s power.” That is how the most recent edition of the HarperCollins Bible Dictionary describes them anyway.

The entry takes up a full page or so and parses out the findings of contemporary Biblical scholarship on the peculiar events:

1. “Miracles are usually (though not always) performed on behalf of humankind, and they always serve as exhibitions of divine glory.”
2. In the world of the Old Testament, miracles would not have been seen as scientifically impossible or somehow taking place outside of the laws of nature. They weren’t “supernatural events” but “extraordinary ones.”
3. Miracles occur throughout all of Israel’s history in the Old Testament, but especially during the stories of the Exodus and settlement as well as in association with Elijah and Elisha.
4. In the synoptic gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — the Greek word used for them is: *dynamis*, a word that refers to deeds of power, specifically the divine power that Jesus possesses. While in John’s gospel, it’s *semeia*, which translates to *signs*. In other words, they point beyond themselves to a larger truth about the God that Jesus reveals. Miracles are then glimpses into the reign of God.
5. Throughout the New Testament, the miracles of Jesus are largely of healing: He makes the sick to be well. Even the exorcisms are considered bodily healings.

There are also the “epiphany miracles” that manifest Jesus’ divine presence: For example when he walks on water, or in the transfiguration.

And then there are acts of rescue — Jesus calms the roiling sea — as well as acts that provide for the needs of people: he changes water into wine and multiplies loaves of bread to feed a crowd of thousands.

It’s through these miracles that the people who witness them experience the reign of God right here. Right now. In our own history. On the earth. In the soil and spit wiped on a blind man’s eyes. In the human fingers of Jesus stuck into the deaf man’s ears, as we hear about in today’s Gospel. Jesus does not just preach about the Kingdom of God. He shows it to his followers and it draws impossibly, no, extraordinarily near.

Through miracles, Jesus reveals the love and compassion of God.

I don’t know about you, but I sure could use a miracle right about now. More than one, actually. Preferably a handful of each variety:

Healings for the sick, for those afflicted with Covid-19, especially the children suffering who still cannot be vaccinated. A mass healing for those afflicted with constant anxiety that they will catch or spread the virus. A healing for our loved ones who live with dementia, Alzheimers, or cancer or AIDS.

Exorcisms to cast out this world’s demons of war and poverty and strife. To cast out the loneliness and the sorrow and the pain and the suffering that seem to afflict us more acutely than ever these days. An exorcism for all possessed with the demon of greed whether for power or money or both, greed that exacerbates that loneliness, sorrow and pain and suffering.

An act of rescue for every Afghan soul whose entire life has been upended in the past month. An act of rescue for our Haitian brothers and sisters. An act of rescue for our friends and family in Louisiana and New York. An act of rescue for all who live in areas ravaged by hurricanes, fires, floods.

You get the idea. You've been following the same news, living in the same world as I have, after all. I'm guessing you, too, could really do with a miracle.

Well, we get a miracle in today's Gospel reading. But it's the miracle that comes immediately before today's healing of the man who cannot hear nor speak that I have not been able to get out of my mind.

Immediately following the argument we heard last week between Jesus and the Pharisees over purification rites, Jesus is approached by a Syrophenician woman. A Gentile. She's not in our Gospel reading today, but this encounter comes just before.

The Syrophenician woman has a daughter with an "unclean spirit." In other words, she too, is in need of a healing miracle. I imagine that once she got word that Jesus was nearby, she fled her home, sandals barely tied, and ran, robes frantically flying in the wind behind her. She probably pushed her way through the crowd that had gathered around this man Jesus, the man about whom word was traveling fast: He had the power of a god.

She wasn't a Jew. And this Jesus was a Jew. He supposedly spoke not of *his* god, one among many, but of the God of all. She didn't know about all that, but she did know that she loved her daughter so completely, she would do anything for her. Including bow and beg at the feet of this strange man who promised a different kind of world than the one those Pharisees talked about.

And so she went to him. Pushing right past the line of people waiting to be seen by Jesus.

"My daughter has an unclean spirit!" She pleaded, tears leaving streams in the dust that had coated her cheeks, "Please, save her!"

But, barely glancing at her, Jesus said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

So desperate was the woman that she didn't even need to think before responding: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."

And then, as we hear today, Jesus returns from Tyre and is brought a man who could not hear nor speak. And placing his fingers in his ears, he gives him hearing. He spits and touches the man's tongue and he gives him speech.

"A cancer inexplicably cured. A voice in a dream. A statue that weeps. A miracle is an event that strengthens faith," so writes Fredrick Buechner. He goes on: "It is possible to look at most miracles and find a rational explanation in terms of natural cause and effect. It is possible to look at Rembrandt's *Supper at Emmaus* and find a rational explanation in terms of paint and canvas.

Faith in God is less apt to proceed from miracles than miracles from faith in God."

The Bible dictionary I mentioned earlier points out that all miracles in the New Testament focus on faith, particularly that of the afflicted, but on others as well.

And I suppose that is why I was so stuck on this story of the Syrophenician woman. Because she shows great faith. The kind of faith that miracles proceed from.

In her begging and bowing and even back talking to Jesus, she expresses her deepest desire and her faith that another world is possible. This kingdom that Jesus has been preaching about — even though she is not a Jew, she knows deep in her soul that it is possible. That a better life for her beloved daughter, one in which she is free from unclean spirits, is possible. In her faith, she also has hope. And that is indeed why Jesus responds with a miracle.

Miracles such as the healing we heard about today show us that the kingdom of God is not subject to the limitations of our human imagination.

Faith in the God of Jesus Christ, is a lens through which to see the world. It is to have hope, no matter what all the evidence is pointing to. Faith doesn't need miracles. But we who are faithful are strengthened in our resolve when we experience them.

And so, I bid you to pray with me for faith. The kind that makes you to bow and beg at the feet of Jesus. The kind of faith that makes you to see his extraordinary deeds already at work in the world.

Pray with me for a miracle, that Jesus opens my ears and yours to hear the places and people he is calling us to serve, to hear the cries of our siblings in Christ in need of food, of housing, of friends, of love.

Pray with me for a miracle that Jesus looses my tongue and yours to speak up, to speak out against the injustice, the greed, the violence that plagues not just the world out there, but in our very own hearts.

Pray with me not for what is possible but what we cannot yet imagine. Pray for wholeness, for love, for compassion. For not just enough, but abundance not just for ourselves — and our families and our communities, but all of God's people.

Ask God for faith in something better, something bigger. And ask God to show you the way.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.